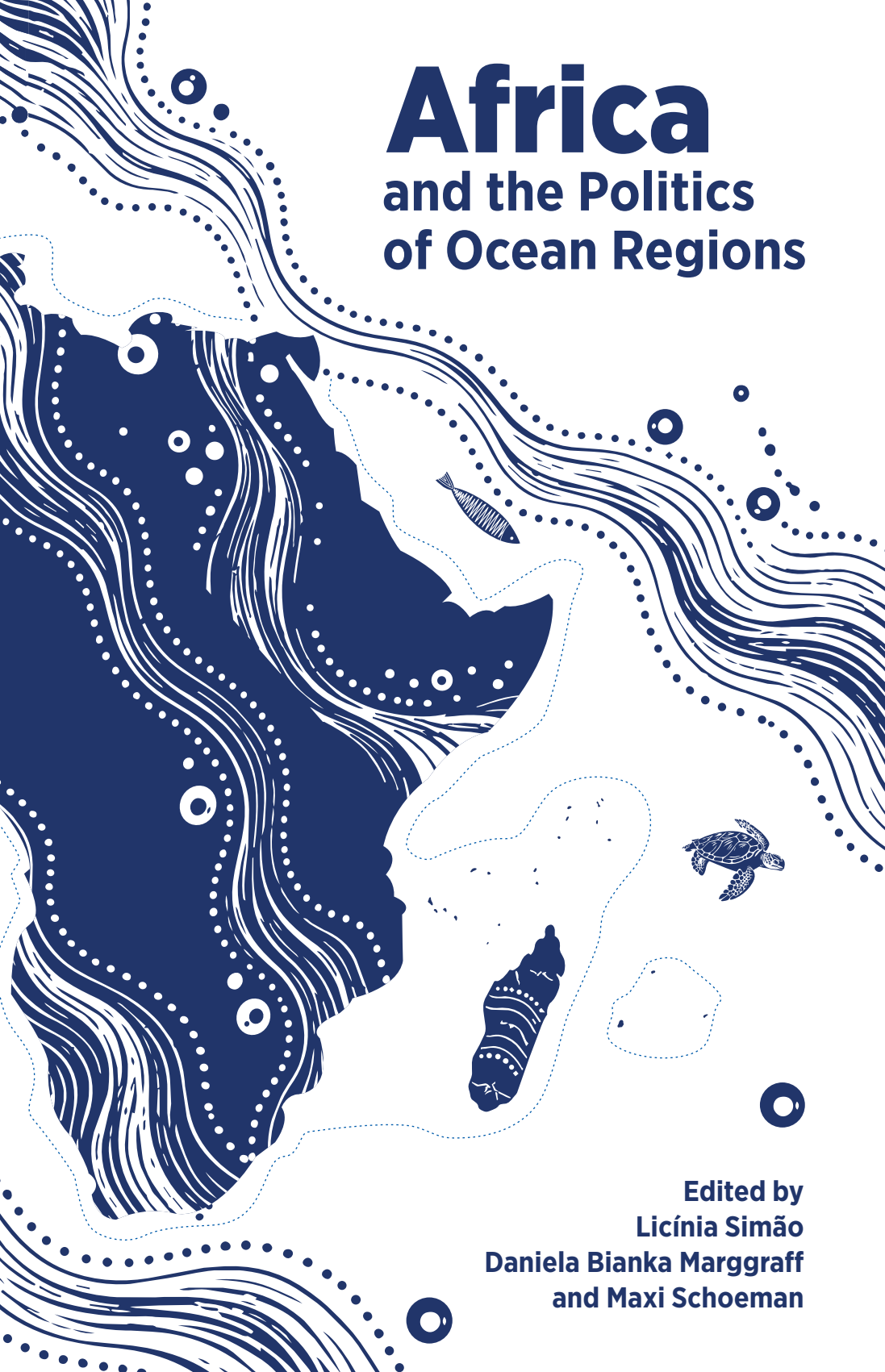
Africa
and the Politics of Ocean Regions



Edited by
Licínia Simão
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and Maxi Schoeman

Africa and the Politics of Ocean Regions

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Daniela Bianka Marggraff
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Africa and the Politics of Ocean Regions





NATIONAL INSTITUTE
FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



South African
BRICS Think Tank

Dedication

In loving memory of
Professor Maxi Schoeman
(1954-2025)

FOREWORD

By Sonja Theron
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In 2007, I entered a lecture hall at the University of Pretoria to attend my introductory module on International Relations (IR). I expected the usual lecture on concepts and theories. Instead, the lecturer stood in front of hundreds of students, each with a different social, economic and cultural background, not fifteen years after the end of apartheid and walked us through one of the most essential driving forces in international relations: perspective. That lecturer was the late Professor Maxi Schoeman. She taught us not only to understand the perspective of others but also to interrogate our own. Perspective influences the interpretations, narratives, decisions, imaginaries and realities of international relations. It explains why the threat of climate change can seem existential to one and peripheral to another; why perceived success in making and building peace can also be read as a failure; and why, faced with the same crisis, two states will embark on different, and sometimes opposing, solutions. It also explains how shifting our level of analysis from the global to the regional generates new interpretations of international dynamics and ideas free of the burdens of Western-centrism disguised as universality. The regional reveals the constructed imaginaries that shape perception, behaviour and power. To push this even further, what does shifting our perspective of the region from the territorial to the oceanic reveal?

Following that first encounter, I came to know Prof. Schoeman as a supervisor, boss and colleague, and if I were to identify one unifying thread in her research and daily work, it would be her understanding of and respect for perspective. In these books, and in her foundation of the Ocean Regions Programme, she continues this tradition with her co-editors Prof. Licínia Simão and Dr Daniela Bianka Marggraff. The Ocean Regions Programme was created to convene, compare and collate differing perspectives on Oceanic IR. It became an incubator of ideas designed to shed the seablind label attached to both academic and policy spaces. In doing this, it centred ideas from a diversity of traditions, professions, disciplines and locations. It produced an epistemic community of scholars and

practitioners whose contributions interrogate the meaning of the ocean, its intersection with international relations and its commentary on power. The result is a work, codified in this edited volume, that ultimately questions how the ocean is understood and encountered when viewed from different perspectives.

Why oceans? The ocean has been the site of and borne witness to many a watershed moment in international relations. From the facilitation of early contact, exchange and discovery across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, to the medium of conquest, colonisation and slavery, the ocean carries the memory of humanity's triumphs and greatest atrocities. We now know that whales felt and still carry with them the stress of the cataclysm that was World War II.[1] What will the ocean remember 80 years from now? As we enter the latter half of the United Nations Decade of the Ocean, the ocean sits at the heart of many regional and global crises. The Strait of Hormuz, previously considered only of importance by experts of the Middle East and those passing through its narrow waters, has entered global consciousness. Repeated supply chain disruptions caused by accidental obstructions in canals to geopolitical turmoil slow global and local economies. And most concerning, the Blue Machine[2] that cleans our air, calibrates our seasons and sustains our ecosystems is collapsing[3].

These challenges cannot be understood through our traditional lens of regions bound by continental and territorial boundaries. By shifting the understanding of region to the oceanic, the editors and contributors of this book shift our perspective of global trends and power dynamics. They prioritise the African perspective by focusing not only on Africa's oceans, but also on Africa's intersection with the world's one ocean. Part One starts with an exploration of the concept of ocean regions. Here, the contributors reinterrogate established concepts and issues in international relations, including regions, international law and governance, from an oceanic perspective. Part Two directs our attention to Africa's role in governing oceans, resulting in a robust mapping and analysis of African agency through both traditional and non-traditional forms of power. In a discipline that has marginalised both oceanic and African perspectives, the contributions of this project serve to recalibrate our point of view.

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1 Measurements of historical cortisol levels reveal a stress response among whales during the years of WWII (Pavid, K. 2018. Whale earwax reveals just how much human activity can stress out marine mammals. *Natural History Museum*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2018/november/whale-earwax-reveals-just-how-much-human-activity-can-stress-out.html. (Accessed 19 May 2026).

2 In her book, Helen Czerski uses the metaphor of a blue machine to illustrate the role the ocean plays in the way our planet functions (Czerski, H. 2023. *The Blue Machine: How the Ocean Shapes Our World*. Great Britain: Penguin Random House UK).

3 As an illustrative example, recent models suggest the Atlantic current system is likely to approach collapse at the end of this century (Carrington, D. 2026. Critical Atlantic current significantly more likely to collapse than thought. *The Guardian*. [Online]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/apr/15/critical-atlantic-current-significantly-more-likely-to-collapse-than-thought. (Accessed 19 May 2026.)

As we move into an uncertain geopolitical future, this recalibration is needed not only to understand emerging issues but also to identify opportunities. Prof. Maxi Schoeman had an eye for the future and potential in things. The Ocean Regions Programme, the networks it built and the emerging scholars it fostered, both epitomised in the editors and authors of this work, serve as a final reminder of this. The Ocean Regions Programme seeks to take her work forward by capitalising on the networks and oceanic consciousness that have been fostered among scholars and practitioners since its inception. Having confronted seablindness by centring the ocean, it now moves towards investigating, understanding and responding to the region's maritime challenges. It does so from an interdisciplinary posture, having discovered this imperative during the annual colloquia held at UP. Furthermore, it looks towards the future of oceans, employing future thinking to bridge the divide between policy and community, in a new endeavour—Ocean Futures—which rests within the Human Futures project of the Emerging Scholars Initiative (ESI) in the Faculty of Humanities at UP. The Ocean Regions Programme and its associated projects have been entrusted to emerging scholars mentored and trained by Prof. Maxi Schoeman.

May this work carry Prof Schoeman's legacy forward, and may she rest in peace.

PREFACE

By Licínia Simão and Daniela Bianka Marggraff

The decision to develop an academic publication dedicated to analysing Africa's role in ocean-related debates and policies emerged from work carried out at the University of Pretoria (UP) in South Africa as part of the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) under the leadership of the late Prof. Maxi Schoeman. Building on a network of academic partnerships, initially structured around a short course on International Relations in the Indian Ocean in which the University of Pretoria is involved but also supported by Erasmus+ research and teaching mobility funds and funding from the South African National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), the ORP reached out to policy makers and academics, particularly by hosting four colloquia on ocean regions governance between 2022 and 2025. The agenda of recognising, confronting and mitigating seablindness and increasing the visibility of ocean issues, at a time when South Africa is playing an active role in BRICS+ (having hosted the summit in 2023), and in other multilateral frameworks (including chairing the G20 in 2025), has provided opportunities to explore emerging insights and recommendations from the perspectives of academics and researchers.

The inaugural colloquium, *The Rise of Ocean Regions: Governance Challenges for the Indo-Pacific and the Atlantic*, held in 2022 in collaboration with the Atlantic Centre in Portugal and the United Nations Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, brought together scholars from South Africa, Mozambique, France, Brazil and Portugal, amongst others, to explore the ocean region governance challenges that face the Indo-Pacific and the Atlantic oceans (ORP 2022). The following year, the programme's second colloquium, *Ocean Regions in an Era of Global Transformations*, was again held at UP, bringing together academics, researchers and practitioners from South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Mauritius, Cameroon, Rwanda, Brazil, India, Greece, Portugal, Australia and the UK to discuss approaches to—and experiences of—ocean region-making and governance with a specific focus on Africa's position, role and agency (ORP 2023).

The third colloquium, *Oceans and Ocean Regions Governance,* held in partnership with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), expanded the

conversation to include island states, legal developments in the law of the sea, climate-induced transformations such as sea-level rise, emerging technologies for seabed exploitation and the implications of BRICS+ and the G20 (ORP 2024). It highlighted questions around territoriality, sovereignty, statehood and citizenship in the context of rapidly shifting oceanic realities. The final event held in 2025 was a conference co-hosted by the Ocean Regions Programme and the African Centre for the Study of the United States, titled *Africa, the US and the Geoeconomics of the Seas*. This conference was probably the widest in geographic scope among past iterations, including both polar regions—the Arctic and Antarctica—as well as perspectives from the US, the Indian Ocean Region, the Black Sea, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In essence, these iterations all served the overarching purpose of being, as articulated by Yvonne Owuor at the third ORP colloquium, 'preoccupied with the place, future of the many Africas, including Oceanic Africa, in crafting a new kind of future'.

These encounters promoted valuable interactions from which a research agenda emerged that challenged dominant perspectives on the oceans and promoted a structured research agenda for African oceans. By bringing together junior and senior scholars with an interdisciplinary outlook on maritime issues, as well as decision-makers and other stakeholders, the Ocean Regions Programme provides a valuable starting point for continent-wide reflection on the value of ocean regions as a framework for addressing maritime affairs in Africa. The scope of contributions to the four colloquia over time, covering topics ranging from naval affairs and international law to the blue economy, international relations, technology and climate issues, is a testament to the significant interest generated by this topic. It also demonstrates Prof. Schoeman's ability to bring together knowledgeable individuals and generate significant interest.

Following the untimely passing away of Prof. Schoeman in September 2025, the editors of this edited volume were faced with a formidable task. Although we had worked closely with Prof. Schoeman in organising the colloquia and developing the Ocean Regions Programme, her vision for the publication was very much her own. While we had no doubt that completing the book project would be the best tribute to her stewardship over the years, we were also dealing with the sudden loss of a friend and mentor. In part, keeping the legacy of the Ocean Regions Programme alive by making it available to a wider audience through this edited volume was a way of coping with our grief. Fortunately, we were never alone in this endeavour, finding many valuable colleagues who supported our work in a multitude of ways.

We would like to begin by expressing our sincere gratitude to the NIHSS for its generous support of this project. This funding made possible not only the development of this edited volume but also the conferences and collaborative spaces that sustained it. Just as importantly, it enabled the participation and scholarly growth of several contributors. We acknowledge the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria for providing an institutional base for the Programme, as well as key staff members, Mr Roland Henwood, Dr Robin Blake and Mr Anthony Bizos, who played a large role in the formation of the Ocean Regions Programme and the establishment of networks worldwide.

Special thanks are also due to Prof. Chris Alden from LSE IDEAS, who played a valuable role throughout this process; to Prof. Valur Ingimundarson from the University of Iceland for his invaluable input, support and advice on the edited volume; and to Kostas Ifantis from the University of Panteion, all of whom became members of the Ocean Regions Programme's Advisory Board after the passing of Prof. Schoeman. Equally so, we are very much indebted to all the authors who contributed to this edited volume, as well as to those who would have liked to contribute but were unable to meet the deadlines, for sharing their immense knowledge with us. The edited volume is not only a culmination of those who contributed, but also a product of discussions over the last several years, which included valuable interactions with colleagues dear to us: Yu-Shan Wu, Jaimal Anand, Samuel Oyewole, Timothy Walker, Sanusha Naidu, Denys Reva, David Willima, Kingsley Makhubela, Ambassador Anil Sooklal (to name but a few). We would also like to thank Heather Thuynsma and her team at the Emerging Scholars Initiative (ESI) Press for their support in publishing the manuscripts during a difficult time, as well as to Sonja Theron for her foreword and her leadership in taking the project forward.

We see this edited volume, which constitutes one of the academic outputs of this work, as a tribute to all those who felt inspired by Prof. Schoeman's vision of the value of the ocean which shapes our own approach to academic cooperation and indeed life. At sea, cooperation is key for survival, and cooperation has been the most important asset on our journey to bring this work to completion. We hope you feel as inspired as we do by these reflections and that you continue to contribute to improving awareness of our shared challenge in managing the global ocean in a sustainable way for all.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Agreement
AIMS	Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy
AMD	African Maritime Domain
AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
ATS	Antarctic Treaty System
AU	African Union
BBNJ	Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction
BCC	Benguela Current Convention
BE	Blue Economy
BOS	Big Ocean States
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BRICS+	Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa, United Arab Emirates
CEMZA	Combined Exclusive Maritime Zone for Africa
CGPCS	Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia
CLCS	Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CPLP	Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries
CS	Continental Shelf
DCOC	Djibouti Code of Conduct
DCoC-JA	Djibouti Code of Conduct Jeddah Amendment
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EAC	East African Community
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEZs	Exclusive Economic Zones
ESA	Eastern and Southern Africa
EU	European Union
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation

G20	Group of 20
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IBSAMAR	India-Brazil-South Africa
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IL	International Law
ILC	International Law Commission
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IMSS	Integrated Maritime Security Strategy
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IOZP	Indian Ocean Zone of Peace
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IR	International Relations
ISA	International Seabed Authority
ITLOS	International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
IUU	Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated
LLSs	Landlocked States
LOS	Large Ocean States
MASE	Maritime Security Programme
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MPA	Marine Protected Area
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NDP	National Defence Policy
NDS	National Defence Strategy
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NWFZs	Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPV	Offshore Patrol Vessel
ORP	Ocean Regions Programme
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum

PROINFA	Programme for Incentives for Alternative Sources of Electrical Energy
PROMAR	Promoção da Mentalidade Marítima
PRSP	Regional Plan for Fisheries Surveillance
RBO	Rules-Based International Order
RCOC	Regional Coordination Operations Centre
ReCoMaP	Regional Coastal Management Programme
RECOS	Resilience of Indian Ocean Coastal Zones
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
RMIFC	Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre
RMSA	Regional Maritime Security Architecture
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAR	Search and Rescue
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SLOCs	Sea Lines of Communication
SMC	SADC Standing Maritime Committee
SSA	Safe Seas Africa
SWIO	Southwest Indian Ocean
TWENex	Transformation of the Waste Sector towards a Waste-Energy Nexus
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNOC	United Nations Ocean Conference
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
WIO	Western Indian Ocean
ZOPACAS	Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

INTRODUCING THE POLITICS OF OCEAN REGIONS

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The politics of the world's oceans has undergone a profound transformation over the past decades. For most of the modern era, the ocean has been viewed as a void between landmasses—a corridor for commerce, navigation and naval power (Mack 2011; Anderson and Peters 2014; Steinberg 2001). Indeed, as de Carvalho and Leira (2022: 5) observe, 'the sea is still more often than not merely an adjunct, a conveyor belt or an obstacle to be overcome in the interaction between landed units'. However, this perspective is being challenged. Ocean spaces are gradually re-emerging as central arenas of geopolitical contestation, environmental vulnerability and economic opportunity. They are subjected to competing imaginaries from both state and non-state actors, while rising concerns over climate change, marine pollution, the emergence of the blue economy and the 'scramble' or 'rush' for offshore resources have slowly begun to bring the oceans back into the purview of scholars and practitioners alike. In this sense, in the contemporary world, oceans are no longer seen as mere physical expanses, but are increasingly understood as strategic perimeters, ecological systems, sites of identity and imagination and important theatres and arenas of international politics. While their strategic significance was heightened during the Cold War, the contemporary period is marked by a growing number of actors engaged in maritime affairs and a subsequent re-evaluation of long-standing assumptions about the value of the oceans. As Langewiesche (2004: 3) aptly reminds us, 'since we live on land, are usually beyond sight of the sea, it is easy to forget that our world is an ocean world, and to ignore what in practice that means'.

Building on the broader re-evaluation of oceans, this edited volume engages with ocean politics in Africa, acknowledging that power is increasingly at the heart of both ocean governance and the many narratives, policies and structures being developed around it. This approach reflects de Carvalho and Leira's (2022: 11) suggestion that oceans are not merely spaces where politics occurs; rather, their meaning and value are continuously constructed and contested through political struggles. Thus, the attribution of meaning and relevance to the ocean depends on the centrality attributed to its features by diverse actors at different points in time and space. This is evident in how, for instance, debates around ocean governance have become battlegrounds for narratives on the value of oceans for ecological planetary well-being, on the one hand, and the economic value of the oceans, on the other (Ehlers 2016; Voyer et al. 2018) or on how oceans connect regions but also create vulnerability to external interference in contexts of power asymmetry (Germond 2015; Piedade 2016; Jacobsen 2017).

Across the sciences, particularly in Geography, History, and within the discipline of International Relations (IR), an expanding research agenda is addressing how ocean regions are constructed, governed and contested (Dirlik 1993; Gillis 2004; Peters, Steinberg and Stratford 2018; Doyle and Rumley 2020). In a recent work, Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating (2025) widen the focus of research on global ocean politics by rethinking the importance of regions as organisational and constitutive units. This growing momentum in IR is also reflected in global forums, where maritime security has, for example, been discussed at high-level open debates three times since 2025 at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC 2025, 2026); in the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States of America (USA), Japan, Australia, France and India; and in the maritime strategies of regional organisations, including the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). For Africa in particular, home to long coastlines, littoral states, numerous Small Island Developing States (SIDS) or Large Ocean States (LOS), and tri-oceanic states such as South Africa, the politics of ocean regions is neither abstract nor peripheral. Indeed, it is, or should be, integral to development, security and identity (see Marggraff, Chapter 8 and Alexandre, Chapter 9, Part II).

The edited volume's central premise is that Africa's relationship to its surrounding oceans has been under-theorised both within African Studies and within IR more broadly. By focusing on the oceans as regions, this edited volume pays tribute to multidimensional views of the oceans: as more than empty spaces connecting land points; as imaginaries of communities; and as spaces with a physical and material presence. By proposing the 'ocean regions' framework as the

organising concept of the analysis, it offers a useful corrective lens, where oceans are addressed as regions in their own right. This analytical framework integrates regionalism, governance, political economy, environmental politics and security within a common conceptual apparatus, putting forward a view of ocean regions as being constituted through governance arrangements, institutional practices, historical trajectories and political identities rather than simply physical geography. Ocean governance serves as a key element in defining the legal, social, economic and political categories of agency. Which ideas about oceans and their management take precedence, and how new ideas make inroads into ocean governance systems, are issues this research agenda seeks to develop. Regional frameworks, on the other hand, constitute a relevant dynamic in the provision of public goods in different geographical locations. Moreover, knowledge production and public discourse on ocean politics are also influencing the way we understand issues such as maritime security, the blue economy, migration and statehood across distinct but interconnected regional spaces.

Ocean regions emerge out of the densification of interaction patterns, both among human and non-human communities. Such interactions can develop through state action, promoting new activities, legal frameworks and institutions, but they often emerge despite the state. The contention in this research agenda is that ocean-based regionness provides valuable insights into how international relations are being pursued, making evident dynamics that escape terracentric approaches to the study of IR. We contend that 'ocean regions' have emerged as a concept that seeks to sharpen our analytical lenses on the changing and multiple ways oceans, and maritime governance in particular, shape our political structures. For the purpose of this project, ocean regions can be defined as units of analysis for examining power relations whose formation and maintenance are mainly driven by dynamics rooted in and across the oceans (Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025: 100). An ocean region transcends more traditional land-centred approaches: it not only connects states and societies but also constitutes a site of action as part of a social construct. Its specific geographic shape might be contested—its physical boundaries are, after all, human-determined.

Moreover, on an epistemic level, a study of oceans and ocean regions provides a distinct view on how knowledge can be acquired, challenging notions of political time, our relations with geography and space and how power can be exercised in the physical context of oceans. They also invite a more ecosystemic view of processes, with deep interconnections across regional frameworks and linking the (in)security of communities and individuals across long distances on a planetary scale.

Reflecting this perspective, the chapters across the edited volume employ a diverse range of qualitative and interpretive methodological approaches. Despite this methodological diversity, they share a common analytical commitment: using ocean regions as an analytical device that shifts the focus from land-based politics to power dynamics driven by ocean-based processes. To operationalise this approach, contributors employ a variety of methodological tools. For example, Part I, Chapter 1 adopts a multi-scalar analytical framework to demonstrate how ocean regions can be examined beyond state-centric and terrestrial approaches. In doing so, it examines interactions between the seas and across multiple socio-spatial scales, from the individual and local to the national, regional, and global. Chapter 2 introduces the concept of crisis awareness as a distinctive analytical perspective, while Chapter 3 applies a chronopolitical narrative analysis to examine how time is mobilised to legitimise political claims and establish control, particularly in the Arctic. Chapters 4 (Part I) and 8 (Part II) draw more heavily on empirical data collected through bibliometric mapping in the case of the former, and interviews in the case of the latter. Chapters 8 and 11 (both in Part II) draw on elements of comparative analysis to guide their analysis. These methodological choices demonstrate the flexibility of the ocean-regions framework across different research questions, empirical contexts and scales of analysis.

Furthermore, methodologically, the two parts are complementary. Part I is primarily conceptual and theoretical, advancing alternative ideas of thinking about ocean regions. Part II builds on these foundations through empirically rich analyses of African maritime politics, governance and security, bringing attention to issues, actors and processes that have often been overlooked in the broader literature on ocean politics. The edited volume and, in particular, Part II are largely centred on African perspectives and African scholarship on ocean politics. It aims to develop an African-centred maritime IR agenda, demonstrating that African states, regional organisations and island states are increasingly shaping the evolution of regional ocean governance. The edited volume provides a twin focus on the broader conceptual and thematic terrain of ocean-region politics and then turns to Africa's specific position within it. It combines academic and more policy-oriented perspectives as a way to illustrate the different forms of agency engaged in ocean politics and ocean region-building.

AFRICA'S PLACE IN AN OCEANIC CENTURY

Since 2021, under the leadership of the late Professor Maxi Schoeman, the University of Pretoria's Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) has sought to locate and develop African perspectives on the oceans within the field of IR, without confining these perspectives to the discipline alone. On the one hand, Africa has traditionally been marginalised within IR, both through the exclusion of African voices and through the limited relevance attributed to African dynamics in the analysis of international affairs (Bach 2013; Acharya 2014; Otto and Moeng 2025). This neglect is compounded by what has been described as 'seablindness', where African states and their governments continue to be mainly terra-centric in their strategic thinking. This parallels the 'oceanic amnesia' that de Carvalho and Leira (2022) suggest plagues the discipline of IR. In this sense, Africa's position within what could be called 'Oceanic IR' or 'International Terraqueous Relations' (Guillaume and Costa López 2022) has been both externally marginalised and internally underarticulated. Yet, Africa's maritime surroundings—the Atlantic, Indian and Southern Oceans, as well as the Mediterranean and Red Seas—are sites of trade, migration, environmental pressures, transnational crime, militarisation, geopolitical rivalries, as well as areas of new forms of agency and zones of peace and conflict. At the same time, these oceanic regions act as connectors, linking African states to powerful external actors whose interests are increasingly asserted through their oceanic strategies. Hence, the oceans are not barriers to opportunities or challenges but rather conduits thereof.

There are several indications of the transformations currently occurring in the oceans, such as the return of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region; the expanding security and economic footprint of both China and the United States in the Indian Ocean; India's maritime turn in what it considers to be its ocean or 'backyard'; Russia's and China's growing presence in the Southern Ocean; and the new US imperialist discourse on the Atlantic and Arctic, articulated through sovereign designs on Greenland and Canada and the military intervention in Venezuela. The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz for the world economy, combined with the negative impacts of the US and Israeli military attacks on Iran in early 2026 serves to remind us that freedom of navigation is essential to our way of life. For African states and regional organisations, the challenge is not only to react to these transformations but also to affect them. Key issues, ranging from deep-sea mining, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and piracy to the governance of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), climate resilience and the centrality of the blue economy demand African perspectives. Some have always

been there, just beneath the surface, while others need to be developed in an effort to mitigate 'seablindness'.

PURPOSE, RATIONALE AND STRUCTURE OF THE EDITED VOLUME

This edited volume comprises contributions from a range of scholars and practitioners involved in ocean regions research, particularly those who have been participating in the activities of the ORP at the University of Pretoria and who have an interest and expertise in the role and place of Africa, and the Global South more broadly, in these emerging regions. However, while centring the African context, this edited volume remains open and attentive to perspectives on and from other ocean regions. With this in mind, it includes contributions from scholars writing on the existential threat of sea-level rise in the Pacific and how this impacts migration (see Otto and Rydberg, Chapter 6, in Part I) a topic of particular relevance to Africa, where its littoral and island states face growing climate impacts and climate-related migration is a pressing concern. Likewise, the edited volume incorporates a contribution on the Arctic (see Ingimundarson, Chapter 3, in Part I), which explores the unravelling of the well-presented, if internally fraught, idea of Arctic exceptionalism and the resurfacing of Cold War and neo-imperial impulses. While this polar region may appear geographically distant from Africa, it presents an opportunity to deliberate on the ways in which, despite the many differences between the Arctic, the Southern Ocean and the Antarctic continent, there may be common unifying trends, such as the erosion of the 'exceptionalism' framing that accompanies both regions. Equally important, the edited volume brings together a diverse range of contributors from both academia and practice. As a result, the contributions towards the latter part of the edited volume are more strongly empirically oriented. From the outset, the intention was to reflect the breadth of discussions that have emerged over the years and to ensure that no particular voices are excluded. Despite the diversity of perspectives presented, the unifying thread among these diverse contributions is a clear focus on either African oceans, African scholars addressing oceanic issues or non-African scholars who have actively participated in shaping this research agenda. Consequently, while some contributions are directly related to African oceans, others explore different oceanic regions influenced by this engagement.

The broad regional focus of both contributing authors and respective topics reflects the deep interconnectedness of maritime spaces and the scientific understanding that, from a biological and ecological perspective, the planet is home not to many oceans but to one continuous body of water. Besides constituting a tangible outcome of events and discussions about the dynamics affecting different oceanic spaces, this edited volume aims to significantly advance ongoing debates on ocean politics. The discussion of ocean regions as an analytical concept (see Alden & Simão, Chapter 1) in IR provides a lens for understanding how power diffusion and concentration processes unfold, as well as how structural trends in international politics are evolving under the compounding pressures of our time.

Africa and the Politics of Ocean Regions is therefore an attempt to synthesise both African and non-African perspectives on the major themes configuring ocean regions today. It brings together scholars from within and outside the region, across disciplines, generations and cultural backgrounds, who have actively been involved in the ORP to:

- Interrogate how oceans are unsettling and reshaping the meaning of international governance concepts—from the blue economy and maritime security to the accelerating climate emergency.
- Explore how fundamental IR concepts, such as sovereignty, security, statehood and agency take on new meanings when viewed through an oceanic lens.
- Identify where African agency emerges in these ocean regions and where it is obscured or constrained.
- Trace the political, economic and ecological dynamics driving ocean region formation as well as the diverse constellation of actors who construct them.

The above themes serve as the organisational logic of this edited volume, with contributions by authors addressing them spread across two parts. Part I comprises six chapters focusing on the emerging thematic debates about the politics of ocean regions. In 'The Concept of Ocean Regions—A Framework of Analysis for Africa', Chris Alden and Licínia Simão develop the concept of ocean regions as a multi-scalar analytical framework, challenging entrenched state-centric and terrestrial approaches to governance. Applying this framework to Africa, they demonstrate how historical inequalities, evolving regional institutions and diverse actors have shaped the continent's engagement with ocean politics, the blue economy and maritime governance. Building on this, Anthony Bizos,

Simon Adam Louw and Tshegofatso Ramachela, in 'Ocean Governance and the Interregnum: A View from Africa', introduce a crisis-oriented lens to show how fragmentation in ocean governance reflects and inflects the broader breakdown of the liberal international order and compounds uncertainty in maritime politics. Their analysis highlights how legal, security and ecological crises—exacerbated by 'seablindness' and Eurocentric crisis framings—require integrating ocean regional analysis with crisis-awareness to enable more adaptive and strategic maritime governance.

Valur Ingimundarson's chapter, 'Narrating Arctic Geopolitics and Governance: The Emplotment and Unravelling of Exceptionalism', complements these conceptualisations of ocean regions by demonstrating how regional orders in the Arctic are narratively constructed and politically stabilised through temporal imaginaries. His chapter demonstrates how Arctic geopolitics and governance have been constructed through competing chronopolitical narratives, with 'exceptionalism' masking underlying tensions while enabling states to institutionalise control and marginalise alternative imaginaries. He argues that the breakdown of this narrative—exposed by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—reveals an interregnum in which layered and conflicting temporalities destabilise Arctic regional order, linking to a broader crisis in global governance. Traversing to the South Atlantic, Murilo Gomes da Costa, Emanuel de J.C. Semedo, Frederico A.A. de Gomes Filho, Rafaela M.M. Collopy and Carlos R.S. Milani, trace—in their chapter 'The Ocean Agenda in Academic and Policy Debates in Brazil: Connections with the Climate Emergency'—the shift in Brazil's approach to ocean governance, from predominantly anchored in sovereignty-based governance to a sustainability-focused regime. They illustrate how shifting global norms, particularly around climate change, are reshaping state practices, even as these remain constrained by geopolitical and domestic pressures.

Redirecting the focus from national policy transformation, Pedro Seabra explores multilateral practices through which regional norms and cooperative orders are actively constructed and sustained. In 'Zones of Peace and Ocean Regions: The South Atlantic and Indian Ocean', he argues that rather than viewing these zones as failed or symbolic projects, they become sites of collective engagement and cooperation where shared norms, expectations and alternative visions of ocean governance are constructed and cultivated. This framing highlights how ocean regions are not only institutional constructs but are also sustained through repeated diplomatic and political engagement. Rounding out Part I, Lisa Otto and Agnes Rydberg in 'Sea-Level Rise, Statehood and the Future of Climate Migration', examine how climate change-induced sea-level rise

fundamentally disrupts the terra-centric foundations of international law and politics by threatening the land, statehood and sovereignty of SIDS, specifically in the Pacific. They argue that preserving statehood without territory requires robust protection for mobility, rights and cultural continuity, calling for a systemic recalibration of international law.

Part II focuses on Africa's role in ocean regions' governance, covering African dynamics around the blue economy, maritime security, multilateralism, foreign policy, organised crime and the role of emerging powers in the management of Africa's ocean politics. In 'Governing African Ocean Regions: Asserting Strategic Agency through International Law or the Rules-Based Order?', Vishal Surbun argues that Africa asserts strategic agency in ocean governance by prioritising international law—especially UNCLOS—over the more ambiguous 'rules-based international order'. He demonstrates this through tracing Africa's role in influencing maritime norms, developing continental frameworks like AIMS2050 and the Lomé Charter and engaging in legal activism to advance sovereignty and regional development. Building on the theme of Africa's agency in ocean governance, Daniela Bianka Marggraff focuses on the narratives that emerge from the African Small Island Developing State of Seychelles in 'When 'Small' States Think Big: Articulating Agency through Seychelles' Large Ocean State Narrative'. While typically portrayed as vulnerable and defined by an agency and power deficit, these states increasingly refer to themselves as 'Large Ocean States'—a label that does not replace SIDS but rather complements it. She argues that this functions as an intentional diplomatic strategy to assert sovereignty, highlight governance challenges and project leadership in ocean governance. This demonstrates that these 'small' states go beyond just being mere rule-takers. The agency of SIDS in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is furthered by Pascaline Alexandre in her contribution, 'Reclaiming the Blue Economy: SIDS, Maritime Security, and Island-led Ocean Governance in the Western Indian Ocean'. Focusing not on individual SIDS, but rather on the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), she demonstrates how island states translate security cooperation into sustainable ocean governance through their own articulation of the blue economy. In doing so, she combats 'island-blindness'—which has historically rendered SIDS invisible in global governance narratives—and shows how islands are not vulnerable recipients of external frameworks but active architects of ocean futures.

While the above contributions point to the emergence of African agency in these ocean regions, the remaining contributions discuss the areas where it remains obscured or constrained. Francois Vreÿ, in 'The Untapped Maritime

Potential of BRICS+: A Time for Strategic Realignment', points to some of the diverse actors that could be involved in ocean governance, namely the BRICS+ bloc. However, he highlights that there is very little evidence of a concerted BRICS maritime focus, even though, in theory, these are all states that should have a vested interest in the ocean. Carina Bruwer's empirical analysis of maritime crime in 'Below Deck: The Criminal Markets of Africa's South Atlantic', highlights just how susceptible notions of African agency can be, especially when put against the challenges of organised crime in southern-western Africa. She analyses two selected illicit trades in Africa's South Atlantic, namely illegal fishing between the border region of Angola and Namibia and drug trafficking in the tri-oceanic state of South Africa. Illicit flows flourish in these waters, with the fluid nature of water facilitating the criminal actors to move between jurisdictions, while African coastal states struggle to maintain a maritime presence and maritime domain awareness. Part II concludes with a contribution by Thean Potgieter and Mark Blaine, who in 'SADC Maritime Insecurity: Mapping Threats, Stakeholders and Solutions', examine maritime insecurity in the Southern African Development Community which includes the Atlantic and Indian Ocean off the coast of Southern Africa. They map out the diverse threats, noting that non-traditional security threats have become central concerns and traditional threats remain low, even though states remain mandated to protect their waters under international law. These security threats are cast against the backdrop of national and regional responses that are hampered by limited capacity. Importantly, maritime security is not just in the domain of states, but also the responsibility of non-state actors who play an increasingly important role.

This edited volume aims to provide an overview of debates on and in Africa and ocean politics, while offering scholars a foundation from which to develop new lines of inquiry that place Africa and the oceans at the centre of analysis. It is intended not as a definitive account, but as a starting point for further scholarship that may refine, extend, or challenge the arguments advanced here. Inevitably, several important avenues of research fall beyond the scope of this edited volume and warrant further investigation. There remains considerable scope for developing approaches to maritime politics that foreground relationality, material systems and ecological processes, particularly from African perspectives. Similarly, greater engagement with feminist and gender approaches could generate insights into questions of power, labour, care and representation in maritime spaces. Future scholarship should also continue to explore African agency and imagination in relation to the oceans. This includes examining how the ocean is conceptualised by different African actors—from land-linked and

littoral states to island states, coastal communities and non-state actors—and how these diverse understandings inform ocean governance. While a growing body of scholarship has examined ocean imaginaries and agency in the Pacific Islands, comparable work from African perspectives remains relatively limited. Expanding this research would not only enrich understandings of maritime governance but also emphasise the role of actors that have often been marginalised in global debates on the oceans. These directions do not constitute an exhaustive research agenda. Rather they illustrate some of the most promising ways in which the conversations initiated by this edited volume might be extended. Ultimately, ocean politics remains a dynamic and evolving field of inquiry whose scope will continue to expand as scholars address the complex crises, narratives and institutional changes of the current maritime seascape.

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PART I
THE POLITICS OF OCEAN REGIONS

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONCEPT OF OCEAN REGIONS – A FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS FOR AFRICA

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OCEAN POLITICS—POSITIONING THE DEBATE

The study of ocean politics has emerged as an area that combines distinct approaches to understanding how the vast expanse of the global ocean has been perceived, managed and redefined. To speak of the politics of ocean regions is to assess the multitude of perspectives that combine to produce the specific outlooks and policies that shape the ocean. As de Carvalho and Leira (2022: 11) argue, 'seeing the ocean as political [...] implies seeing the ocean as something with no inherent meaning, as something which is politically contested as such'. Because of the ocean's disputed nature—as a critical ecological balancer, a source of economic growth and a cultural and identitarian space—its governance reflects the power differences among the multiple agents interacting with it. Building on this assumption, the place of African states in ocean politics is contingent on their ability to influence and to change power relations.

Traditionally, oceans have been approached from environmental and geopolitical perspectives that are often contradictory. Environmentalists emphasise the interconnectedness of the ecosystems that sustain the global ocean (Harris 2019; Worm et al. 2006), whereas geopolitics considers the physical world to be divided by state interests and jurisdiction. And while ecosystemic views have advocated for placing at the heart of governance a view of regions as being 'anchored in crossborder ecosystems' (Paes 2023: 56), geopolitics has

developed alongside the imperial expansion of European nations across the seas, forging an instrumental view of the oceans that served the interests of the most powerful states (Germond 2015; Blachford 2024). In this scenario, Africa's long experience with colonialisation, dependency and peripherisation has made it an object of geopolitical interests, rather than a fully empowered player. On the other hand, the renovation of Africa's economic development agenda, namely through NEPAD (The New Partnership for Africa's Development) of the African Union (AU) and subsequent projects have assisted in the creation of an African vision of the value of the seas. Identifying additional avenues of African engagement in the global conversations on the ocean is an important contribution to overcome the vastly undertheorised African relationship to its surrounding oceans.

Key to this process is the acknowledgement that access to knowledge and technology continues to play a key role in states' ability to enter the maritime game. From an environmental perspective, the ocean plays a central role in climate change, food security and biodiversity preservation. For instance, the AU's Africa Blue Economy Strategy (AU-IBAR 2021) acknowledges the importance of the blue economy for reducing Africa's poverty levels, identifying positive financial opportunities, preserving the environment and promoting social inclusion (Beaumont, Hampton and Willima 2025). However, mobilising knowledge and technology for social change requires advanced scientific understanding of how Earth systems work, regular monitoring and integrated information-sharing systems, the latter remaining sharply marked by epistemic inequalities (Hornidge, Partelow and Knopf 2023). Similarly, maritime geopolitics continues to rely on technological knowledge and superiority, enabling rising and great powers to develop global trade routes, project military power and explore resources (Rozwadowski and van Keuren 2004; Robinson 2021). The ocean's knowledge base has thus grown significantly through maritime, naval and scientific activities, paving the way for the development of many other areas, but it has done so maintaining many of the inequalities that we see on land, namely vis-à-vis Africa.

As our knowledge and awareness of the environmental, economic, security and cultural roles of the ocean grew, international politics also increasingly turned to ocean regions. International law has played a significant role in regulating the expanding use of the oceans and seas. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is the most relevant instrument in establishing a legal regime for the ocean. One of its main contributions is balancing the rights of nation states with the common responsibility inherent in the concept of the global commons (Allott 1992; Lambach 2022)—a key balance largely resulting from developing states' demands for UNCLOS to address the oceans as common

heritage of mankind. As the volume of activities and interests at sea expands, 'UNCLOS has been called to interact with a variety of other regimes, which regulate specific economic activities or address particular environmental issues' (Mendenhall 2019; Trevisanut, Giannopoulos and Holst 2020: 2; see also Joyner 2000). Several other sectoral and regional treaties have also been established, reinforcing the global maritime governance structure, and building synergies between the global and regional levels. Among the most significant examples for Africa are the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, governing activities in Antarctica, the 1980 Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, relevant for governing the Southern Ocean or, more recently, the adoption of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction convention, which came into force in January 2026.[1]

These juridical regimes have sought to accompany the 'Blue Acceleration' ongoing in the last fifty years (Jouffray et al 2020) and the expanding economic and geopolitical interests at sea. As more states turn to the ocean, we are reminded that since time immemorial, political communities have sought to exercise their sovereignty at sea, extracting resources, combatting illegal activities and controlling political adversaries. Coastal communities were at the forefront of these policies, simultaneously making sovereignty tangible for their states and assuming a responsibility to global ecosystems' preservation. The ocean's security and cultural role becomes particularly evident as threats to traditional ways of life raise the insecurity of coastal communities, particularly for populations disproportionally affected by climate change and politically marginalised at the national, regional and global levels. Due to the threats of climate change, the overexploitation of resources and unchecked urbanisation and industrialisation in Africa, the promotion of sustainable socio-ecological projects represents a significant contribution of oceans to regional peace and stability (Bueger and Edmunds 2024). Long-standing shared approaches to the sea by coastal communities worldwide and diasporas linked across oceans by language and culture could also mean a stronger cultural connection, linking distinct communities, regions and global networks and further contributing to robust socio-cultural ties.

Considering the integrated nature and cross-sectoral effects of ocean politics, identifying critical agency capabilities becomes essential to explaining outcomes

[1] The Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) was adopted on 19 June 2023 by the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction convened under the auspices of the United Nations. It was open for signature by all states and regional economic integration organisations from 20 September 2023 to 20 September 2025, and entered into force on 17 January 2026. Information available at https://www.un.org/bbnjagreement/en (Accessed July 2026).

of ocean governance processes and identifying key trends in the blue economy, maritime security and environmental sustainability, among others. The development of ocean politics has been driven by a growing variety of actors operating across multiple scales and shaping diverse policies (Haas et al. 2022). States are central agents in international politics because they command the legitimacy enshrined in sovereignty, they have the material means to explore the ocean, and they have articulated their interests through international law, governance structures and the promotion of activities at sea. Although private actors have over time worked with and alongside states on multiple maritime issues (Ceglia, Peters and Steinberg 2025), until the early twentieth century, European powers and the United States exercised unrivalled influence over the seas. However, the last century saw the emergence of competing global powers in the maritime domain, most notably China, but also regional powers, including Russia, Brazil and India, and increasingly powerful private actors.

Private economic agents continue to be key in many ocean-related activities, from commercial activities to fishing, from private security to Maritime Domain Awareness provision. Private actors in off-shore or coastal activities, including energy production, tourism and aquaculture among others, further exercise pressure on the ocean well beyond the strict control of the states (Bennett 2000; Liss 2020). Illegal and criminal activities have also flourished at sea, benefiting from the 'seablindness' imposed by the ocean's vastness and the many vulnerable coastal communities that see these activities as an alternative means of subsistence (see Bruwer, Chapter 11 and Potgieter and Blaine, Chapter 12). Finally, ocean politics is also marked by global governance and the role of international and regional organisations (Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating 2025), as they provide stewardship, attention and resources to managing the ocean. African maritime agency needs to be mapped by mobilising these distinct approaches, and by identifying the particular ways in which African states, communities and private interests have acted to shape global, regional and national ocean politics.

Ocean politics reflects the complexities of global politics, while also being shaped by the particularities posed by the nature of the ocean. State sovereignty remains a key organising principle of ocean politics, as reflected in UNCLOS, since 'maritime territorial claims are generated from sovereignty over land' (Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating 2025: 2). Disputes over territorial claims at sea are a significant source of insecurity in many regions as the value of the ocean's natural resources increases in an era of technological competition. This puts pressure on the principle of stewardship and shared governance as set out in UNCLOS, which also frames the ocean as a global common that should be

protected and managed collectively. The ecosystemic view of the ocean (Rowe 2021) promoted by science and ecology reinforces the importance of the ocean in managing climate change, preserving biodiversity and increasing food security and well-being. Despite regional differences in how oceans are perceived and actively managed, the interdependent nature of the oceans and their impact on the planet as a whole have been key pillars of views advocating ocean stewardship as a complement to sovereign management (Steinberg 1999; Harden-Davies et al 2020).

Moreover, a critical political economy perspective can also support this view, as the distribution of the benefits and costs of the blue economy is uneven and reflects long-standing patterns of economic and political marginalisation, peripheralisation, and neo-colonial attitudes (Havice and Campling 2010; Kedia and Gautam 2020). Illustrating this tension, at the heart of the BBNJ Treaty is an integrated view of the resources that can be explored in the high seas, of the benefits they should generate, and of their global distribution (Kim 2024), balancing national sovereign interests with sustainability and common responsibility. This has been a long and difficult process to regulate activities in the high seas. However, its implementation through strong governance mechanisms represents an opportunity for ocean conservation and sustainable use—something African states have argued for and now need to deliver on.

Gaining traction among scholars is the view that the ocean changes the way we think about politics, law or the economy. Referring to Renisa Mawani's work, Itamar Mann argues that the 'ocean has become a "methodology" for legal and political thinking' (Mann 2024: 79), driving a reexamination of fundamental assumptions about law and politics. Blanchford (2022: 1) follows this path, advocating for an IR theory that 'consider[s] the influence of oceans and the maritime sphere' in shaping power relations. Driven by these views, we ask how ocean politics is governed across regional spaces. We mobilise the concept of ocean regions as a device to identify patterns and thematic/geographical clusters of ocean-related activities. We argue that these interactions with the sea are embedded in individual, local, national, regional and global practices, evidencing a multi-scalar ocean politics. Building on this, we discuss the role of regionness and ocean regions for an analysis of Africa's participation in global ocean governance and politics. By historicising and contextualising Africa's development of an ocean imagination and corresponding governance systems, we argue in favour of ocean governance projects that adjust to the multiple scales of the ocean's needs.

OCEAN REGIONS

By favouring the regional level of analysis and placing the ocean and its seas at the heart of their work, regional approaches by historians have argued for the relevance of specific traits and connections that shape human relations across time (Braudel 1998; Kearney 2004; Wigen 2006). Geographers, on the other hand, have contested the arbitrary nature of ocean basins as the dominant framework for studying oceans (Lewis 1999). They have shed light on the three-dimensional nature of the ocean and the 'more-than-human' assemblages that compose it (Steinberg 2001). For IR scholars, ocean regions are often perceived and addressed from a security and geopolitical perspective, focusing on the patterns of political and security interactions that emerge around certain maritime spaces (from the Indo-Pacific to the Black Sea or the South China Sea, to name a few) (see de Carvalho and Leira 2022 for a well-informed discussion on this topic). This view continues to favour a territorial approach to international politics, viewing the ocean as a connecting space between borderlands. Strategic facilities such as ports, energy and data terminals and military bases are often located in areas considered to be of high value, such as coastlands, river basins and islands. As Peters (2018: 509) argues, these approaches lack a substantive understanding of the sea as an organising principle of flows, reducing it to a mere surface. This, in turn, has contributed to side-stepping long-term ocean needs in favour of short-term human desires, without fully acknowledging the damaging effects of these policies.

A substantive view of the ocean remains absent, even as a growing economic interest in the ocean bottom and its rich mineral resources develops (Hannigan 2016). Such a three-dimensional view of the ocean challenges the scientific monopoly on knowledge of the ocean depths and raises new questions about the value of science for humanity, namely how it can be used sustainably. Despite the entry into force of the BBNJ Treaty, the regulation of economic activities in the High Seas, specifically in the seabed beyond national jurisdiction, will not fully resolve tensions among states and private entities competing for access to critical minerals. A 2025 US Presidential order entitled 'Unleashing America's offshore critical minerals and resources' (The White House 2025) has been given a thorough rebuttal by the International Seabed Authority (ISA) in its ambitions to extract resources beyond the US national jurisdiction areas (ISA 2025). Ocean mapping and Maritime Situational Awareness are further widening the gap between states regarding the ocean knowledge required for geoeconomic activities. These dynamics are often visible in specific regional

spaces, but they also reflect the global dynamics of financial investment in highly profitable businesses, global power management and competition for knowledge and resources. They also reflect the often-invisible intersectional struggles of indigenous communities, environmental activists and global civil society.

In our analysis of ocean politics, we propose the concept of ocean regions as a relevant analytical device that focuses attention on 'power dynamics, whose formation and maintenance are mainly driven by ocean-based processes' (Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025: 100). Studying ocean regions starts from the premise that this perspective contributes to an understanding of regional dynamics that differs from dominant terraqueous approaches to regionalism. Specifically, an ocean regions approach treats the ecosystem itself as an active integrative entity in system shaping through its material and ideational impacts on actors (human and nature's communities), 'actorness' (identity formation) and acting (process of interactions between actors and the ecosystem). Seen through this lens, ocean governance can best be characterised as 'stewardship' and coheres with broader definitions of environmental stewardship found in the literature: 'Environmental stewardship is a term describing both the philosophy and the actions required to protect, restore, and sustainably use natural resources for the future benefit of the environment and society.' (McLeod et al 2024, p.1).

This approach is distinct from maritime regionalism, in that it does not favour state-based governance as the empirical evidence of regions but rather follows the ocean-based dynamics as region-making features. From that perspective, state policies and formal institutions are but one indicator of region-formation; others include cultural interactions across oceanic spaces and non-human natural ecosystems that stretch across the global ocean, both of which combine regional approaches with global ecosystemic views. Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating (2025) offer an analytical framework for global ocean regions, focusing on their emergence, organisation and effects. Their proposals for constructing ocean regions are based on arguments concerning the management of geophysical and ecological regions, which resemble the arguments of ecosystemic politics (Rowe 2021). Whether viewed as social constructs or evolving narratives, ocean regions exert a political impact through discourse, institutions and resource allocation to address shared challenges. Regions can therefore be studied through their political manifestations; however, their oceanic nature necessitates a broader perspective on the factors uniting agents and the scope of geographical mobilisation, which often transcends the terrestrial manifestations of state-led regionalism. Whereas maritime priorities are often designed through official state policy, ocean regions place the focus on the many connections developing within specific geographical

areas, but which are linked to global dynamics affecting the global ocean as a whole. Ocean regions are, in that sense, both delimited and encompassing in scope; they mobilise regional specificities and global interdependencies for a meaningful analysis of ocean politics.

Region-building is also a process of perception and power projection. Regions encompass and exclude; they delineate the boundaries of belonging and reflect perceptions as well as the tangible realities of social interaction (Neumann 2003; Paasi 2011). As Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating (2025: 5) argue, all these approaches offer useful insights into the theory of ocean regionalism. The authors discuss the composition of regions from the perspective of security and insecurity perceptions. Buzan and Waever's (2003) concept of regional security complexes, which combines material and symbolic elements of power, provides a good starting point. However, they argue that the specificities of ocean regions require relations between actors, their interests and the value of governance structures, cultural elements and historical relations to change significantly across regional ocean spaces. New regionalism is also used to argue for addressing regional formation and its integration into international society (Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating 2025: 6). Authors engaged in the new regionalist turn have advanced a perspective on the 'inside-outside' dynamics of interaction with regions (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel 1999; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003). For ocean regions, this means a new understanding of how this duality is conceived across regional spaces. Furthermore, constructivist approaches to regions as ideas (Steinberg 2001) raise the question of which forms of socialisation and identity formation occur when ocean governance transitions from strictly state-based models to multi-stakeholder frameworks where diverse actors interact with the ocean, defining its significance and shaping their own sense of belonging.

What all of this might look like can be discerned through an examination of post-Cold War efforts like the Arctic Council. The Arctic Council, an innovative multi-stakeholder organisation that includes states, indigenous communities and NGOs in its governance structures, focuses on integrating sustainable development and environmental concerns with stewardship of the terrestrial and ocean regions within its jurisdiction. Notably, the Arctic Council's mandate deliberately excludes military security, signalling that sovereign prerogatives are not only maintained but also a preference of member states. This two-tiered governance of ocean regions—one encompassing a broader space of the human and environmental ecosystem and the other emphasising the classical parameters of geopolitical dynamics of power—enables the member countries to pursue cooperative projects. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022

caused the 'Arctic 7' members to suspend engagement with Moscow, including joint projects. Engagement was only partially restored when a new chair came into office in late 2023 (Arctic Council Secretariat 2024; see also Ingimundarson, Chapter 3).

This situation illustrates the limitations on regional governance in the context of the intensive pressures of great power competition. Examining Africa within prevailing depictions of ocean regions reveals the limitations of these frameworks and highlights the distinctive conditions shaping Africa's maritime domain.

AFRICAN OCEAN REGIONS

This section explores the value of ocean regions for understanding the ocean politics of the African continent. We do so by examining how regionalism has been addressed in the post-colonial African context and linking this to the evolving African outlook on global ocean politics along with the specific challenges faced by African states and regions.

While any discussion of Africa's political economy necessarily begins with a review of the impact of colonialism, this sort of discourse has a special resonance in discussions of African ocean regions. From the seventeenth century onward, the oceans served as a 'middle passage', taking slaves from ports located on the western African coast, stretching down to the Portuguese colony of Angola, to plantations in the Western Hemisphere (Thomas 1997). That near-industrial-scale transatlantic trade set the stage for a pattern of extraction that was echoed on a smaller scale in south-eastern Africa, driven primarily by mineral and energy resources by the early twentieth century, that in key respects prevails to this day. The African ocean regions act as 'transmission belts' for the shipping of primary resources to external markets in exchange for finished goods from centres of production in North America, Europe and Asia, integrating the African continent into the global economy. From this perspective, ocean regions manifest extractivist patterns similar to those found in other dimensions of the global economy.

First generation scholarship on the post-colonial African state diagnosed sources of the continent's political instability and anaemic economic performance variously as 'juridical statehood', poor leadership and weak state institutions as well as the predatory actions of external powers (Rodney 2018; Jackson and Roseberg 1982; Bayart and Ellis 2000). Subsequent scholarship explored this issue in greater depth, looking at how rhizome networks formed a 'shadow state'

that encouraged the growth of systemic state criminalisation (Reno 2000; Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1998; Chabal and Daloz 1999). In looking for a context within which to place the politics of African ocean regions, the question is the degree to which these same 'pathologies' feature in questions of the management and security of Africa's maritime interests. For instance, at national and regional levels, African capacities to monitor and secure its coastal waters, much less the vast expanse of its Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), are demonstrably extremely limited (Walker 2013; Stapleton 2023). The plundering of fisheries by foreign fishing fleets, the inability to exert control over deep-sea mining operations and the role of African ports and coastlines in illegal drugs, wildlife and human trafficking by transnational criminal organisations suggest the inherent vulnerabilities of the African state (see Bruwer, Chapter 11 in Part 2). Is Africa's control over its ocean regions to be understood as another extension of the problem of weak 'juridical sovereignty'? Is African leadership in regional governance lacking in forging a robust maritime policy for the continent? Are weak institutions again the obstacle to effective enforcement of maritime policies? These questions, which feature in the longstanding debates on the territoriality of African states and governmentality, are by extension part of the explanation for the continent's response to its maritime domain.

Turning to Africa's regional governance, the AU and the six regional economic communities (RECs) offer legal and normative frameworks that are inclusive of maritime issues. So do the 'spaghetti bowl' of overlapping regional trade agreements that have long featured as part of the continent's aspirational and existing economic system and which are the founding elements of RECs. Furthermore, these are captured in the AU's promulgation of a series of continental initiatives such as Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS) focused on oceans and waterways (African Union 2015), Agenda 2063 and the African Blue Economy Strategy (UNECA 2019). Establishing the Blue Economy Division within the African Union Commission in 2021, one of the recommendations in Agenda 2063, demonstrates a commitment to focus on the maritime domain as a core development strategy.

This developmentalist understanding of the maritime domain is often overlooked or misunderstood by outside observers in their assessment of African approaches to ocean regions, politics and governance. It informs the evolution of a step ladder of policies emanating from the AU and the RECs, with direct implications for policy development regarding the management of maritime concerns. Indeed, all of these foundational strategies promoted by the AU have been amplified in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement

(AfCFTA), launched by the AU in 2018 and—following the interregnum of the Covid pandemic—endorsed by 54 of the 55 member states by 2024 (UNECA 2025; TRALAC 2024). The AfCFTA's commitment to expand intra-regional trade by radically lowering tariff and non-tariff barriers across the continent, along with further construction of physical infrastructure to realise this aim, represents a new phase in the push to develop closer trading ties across the continent. Interestingly, Africa's growing (albeit uneven) integration into global value chains, particularly in the area of agriculture, has prompted China to finance and construct new ports in countries like Kenya in recognition of the central role of ports in lowering transaction costs (Amendolagine, Presbitero and Rabellotti 2025; Kornher, Sakyi and Tannor 2025). Significantly, the inclusion of riverine and lakes into our understanding of maritime Africa has given rise to a renewed debate on the necessity of a 'nautical theory of African development' that puts more direct policy focus on these inland waterways as critical avenues for bolstering intra-regional and, through that, global trade (The Economist 2025; Maritime Context News 2025a). Using these waterways would, for example, lessen Africa's reliance on costlier road transportation, which currently makes up 80% of all movement of goods on the continent (The Economist 2025).

Security considerations are far from absent in African approaches and guide African policy in the maritime domain as well. These include piracy, transnational criminal drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal wildlife trade as well as illegal and underreporting of fishing (African Center for Strategic Studies 2025). Along with the waters off the Horn of Africa—which saw an international task force deployed from late 2008 onward to combat Somali pirates' disruption of shipping—areas like the Gulf of Guinea have become hotspots for piracy, transnational crime and illegal fishing (Marangio 2025). Notably, regions like the Western Indian Ocean which suffer from many of the same problems, receive relatively little co-ordinated attention, though additional investments in the blue economy are likely to change this situation (Marggraff 2025; Maritime Context News 2025b). As these sources of insecurity also challenge international interests, they invite external interventions in Africa's continental waters, complicating the adoption of regional policies.

At the same time, as noted above, the limited capacity of African governments and institutions, coupled with persistent financial shortages, continue to constrain their ability to address these chronic security concerns (Walker and Reva 2025). Moreover, even where there has been a willingness to pursue collective responses, national priorities have generally prevailed over regional (let alone continental) coordination. In this regard, Kenya's maritime policies stand out as indicative of

the kind of policy activism that is beginning to take hold among some coastal states. In the case of Kenya, the quiet development and implementation of a maritime strategy over the past two decades illustrates the potential to transform the passivity of past approaches into a more concerted positioning of the country in the maritime space (Otele 2025: 80-81). At the same time, formulating and asserting national maritime strategies necessitates greater coordination if their potential is to be realised. This was made clear in the ongoing dispute between Somalia and Kenya over jurisdiction of 92,389 square kilometres of the Western Indian Ocean that includes their respective EEZs. As Pamba (2019) noted in advance of the 2021 International Court of Justice ruling, there were significant risks of losing maritime territory, among them being the limiting of the Kenyan navy's access to the open ocean through a narrow corridor, as well as:

> "…the loss of the country's traditional role as, and ambitious designs for, regional transport and logistics hub. Kenya's port at Mombasa, connected to the Northern Economic Corridor (NEC) railway network, has historically served landlocked countries in east and central Africa" (Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and to an extent, Zambia, and Malawi).

With the ICJ ruling against Kenya in 2021, strategic recalibration was necessary to restore its position—and recoup considerable investment—in a cooperative strategy using existing institutions like the East African Community REC that, in the long run, should strengthen Nairobi's strategic leverage and enhance overall trade conditions both regionally and globally (Sun 2025).

Finally, at the level of local coastal communities they are largely, as is so often the case, 'hidden' from the terrestrial concerns of the seats of power in Africa's capital cities. Such communities are storehouses of knowledge of the coastal maritime environment as well as of the cultural linkages that bind regional trading networks. This is clearly evidenced along the Swahili coast of eastern and southern Africa, as well as on the islands of Mauritius, Reunion and the Seychelles (Chambon et al 2024; Alati et al 2020). Their integration into the larger ambitions of national efforts to foster growth in the blue economy offers much that is positive and contributory, while their exclusion can imperil national and regional aspirations for maritime development and trade. To consign them to the margins is to ignore evidence from fishing communities in Somalia whose dislocation from economic livelihoods engendered a shift to piracy that severely affected international shipping. Or, concurrently, to disregard the role played by local entrepreneurs who utilise their knowledge of local coasts and networks is to

overlook a crucial link in the global supply chain for illicit trafficking. So, finding a voice in the national dialogues that inform policies is as vital as the development of funding vehicles for port construction or logistics hubs for inland transportation.

CONCLUSION

Ocean politics has developed into a complex web of interactions, linking the global economy to environmental challenges, to geopolitics, and to conflict and security. Simultaneously affecting the globe as a whole, and distinct regions differently, the ocean presents a management and comprehension challenge to increased sustainability and well-being. This chapter has articulated a vision of ocean politics governance that contributes to assessing the varying configurations of regional ocean governance across the African continent. We build on the acknowledgement that Africa's relations with its surrounding oceans have been understudied, and that the regional perspective provides a valuable conceptual angle to address the specificities in perceptions of, narratives about and policies for the sea. These specificities are visible both in thematic and geographical manifestations of the African ocean regions. And although the mobilisation of sub-regional African institutions remains a key factor in ocean region-building, these organisations still reproduce terrestrial understandings of ocean governance and exhibit post-colonial features that hamper more autonomous decision-making.

However, since challenges exist across regions, greater cross-regional cooperation is needed, as well as the identification of lessons learned and best practices to increase well-being and security. An increased understanding of how oceans are perceived by African stakeholders could also contribute to more robust ocean politics, especially by identifying structural constraints that require collective action. Mapping the development of regional focuses for ocean management across Africa is also an exercise in assessing how the ocean shapes African imaginations. This view builds an analytical basis for inquiring into the effect of legacies on both African perspectives and policies towards the ocean. It further illuminates how alliances for action are being developed across borders, mobilising ecosystemic perspectives as a framework for assessing local, national and regional politics alike. The relations of African states and communities to the oceans are thus reassessed through competitive lenses as well as that of stewardship, evidencing the many tensions inherent in maritime debates in Africa. From the opportunities of the blue economy to the promise of sustainable energy, from the threat of food insecurity to the management of criminal

activities at sea, from ecological commitment to developmental priorities—all these tensions shape the emergence of distinct African ocean regions.

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CHAPTER TWO

OCEAN GOVERNANCE AND THE INTERREGNUM: A VIEW FROM AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

> "The near collapse of the global financial system in 2008; the emergence of 'statist' economies (especially the BRIC(S) states) as a counter model; the rise of right-wing movements across Europe and the United States since the crisis; the Brexit vote and Trump's election in 2016—these are just the most obvious signs. All these events challenge the various pillars of the [liberal international order], from institutions of global governance to economic openness or multilateral trade and security cooperation" (Babic 2020: 767).

> "The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails."[2]

The maritime domain is increasingly turbulent. From the South China Sea to the melting Arctic, from contested undersea cables to the weaponisation of shipping lanes, ocean regions are witnessing a proliferation of what are commonly

[2] This quote is attributed to American motivational writer, William Arthur Ward.

described as crises. While many of these tendencies or crises originate disparately, they are no longer isolated; they are intimately linked to the broader crisis of the United States (US)-led liberal international order (Babic 2020; Stahl 2019; Ikenberry 2011). As captured in the epigraph, the triumphant post-war US-led international order—a political arrangement once capable of reproducing itself over the course of the Cold War—now shows signs of disarticulation (Gontijo 2025: 8). This chapter argues that the current crisis of the liberal world order is not merely a terrestrial matter but is also profoundly maritime in character. It examines from an African perspective how crises in ocean governance—from the legitimacy decay of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to the strategic framing of maritime emergencies and the shortcomings of International Relations (IR) in adequately apprehending the crisis—are both symptoms of and arenas for the contestation over a post-crisis world order.

The maritime domain is a key arena in which geopolitical contestation between the US and China is playing out. The hegemony of the former is challenged, and while there are indications of a maritime multipolar future (Eriksson and Boonstra 2025), it is not guaranteed and the present moment of crisis 'offers no tendency to resolution' (Stahl 2019: 336). Key multilateral institutions and post-war norms, such as the UNCLOS and freedom of navigation, are notable areas of contention (Islam and Hasan 2025; Heritage and Lee 2020; Wirth 2018). Such symptoms of the legitimation crisis of post-war multilateralism (Gontijo 2025; Zürn 2021) can foreshadow the emergence of regional orders (Eriksson and Boonstra 2025) or a hard confrontation. In the maritime domain, sovereignty disputes signal broader contests between security orders (Strating 2019: 449). The growing importance of undersea cables and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is another feature of the current maritime conjuncture. In the Southern Ocean region, science-based practices are increasingly becoming Trojan horses for securitisation and militarisation (ACSUS-ORP 2025: 54-57), which may yet shatter frozen claims and inaugurate a new geopolitical trajectory for the Southern Ocean. In sum, hot-button maritime issues are proliferating alongside the unresolved crisis of the US-led world order and its turbulent symptoms.

Despite Africa's extensive littoral and growing contributions to maritime governance (ORP 2024: 20-22; Egede 2023; Surbun 2021), the continent remains sidelined in both practice and scholarship—a condition termed 'seablindness' (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). This condition is not unique to Africa but, if unaddressed or neglected, will exacerbate Africa's marginal position in global governance hierarchies—ably diagnosed in structural terms by Fadhel

Kaboub (see ORP-ACSUS 2025: 3-7). In this chapter we argue that taking the current global maritime conjuncture seriously requires taking the current crisis seriously. Though we focus on the African continent, this injunction applies generally to states, policymakers and academics.

We are not suggesting that the current crisis of world order has a maritime origin or that the maritime domain is a privileged site for understanding the crisis. Instead, just as the contributors across this volume call for greater 'sea-awareness' in both policymaking and academic circles (see also Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025; Bueger and Mallin 2023), we argue for a greater 'crisis awareness' when doing precisely so. This is due to the historical reality at present of real transformations in the international system around waning US hegemony, the legitimacy crisis of post-war multilateral institutions like UNCLOS and re-energised geopolitical and geoeconomic contestation, among others. In a word, it is urgent that both seablindness and business-as-usual, or the assumption of stable hegemonic politics (see Stahl 2019) are overcome—and this is particularly important for Africa, whose extensive maritime domain and under-capacitation in that domain risk making the continent a pawn or proxy for great power competition.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It first advances a syncretic, operationalisable definition of crisis, treating crisis as an object of inquiry rather than a self-evident condition (Gilbert 2019: 3). It then turns to the maritime domain to show how fragmentation in ocean governance is rooted in and accelerated by the broader crisis of the liberal international order, while questioning the capacity of IR to grasp the crisis 'as it unfolds' at sea (Babic 2020). The analysis then shifts to Africa, demonstrating how crisis-mediated dynamics and seablindness co-intensify challenges across the continent's extensive littoral and surrounding ocean regions. The chapter next comments on Africa's maritime preparedness, restating the core claim that sea-awareness must be 'crisis aware', and vice versa.

A CRISIS LENS FOR CRISIS TIMES

A prevailing IR definition of crisis is 'a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system which—under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions' (Rosenthal, Charles and t'Hart 1989: 10). While this usefully highlights threat and uncertainty as core attributes of crisis generally, it relies on an overly strict notion of 'time pressure'. Crises can be protracted, as seen in Gramsci's (1971) 'organic' or 'hegemonic' crisis, 'interregnum' (see also Stahl 2019), or the recent

concept of a 'creeping crisis' (Boin, Ekengren and Rhinard 2021). A more fundamental limitation is its under specification of crisis subjectivity or the notion that 'crises are what agents make of them' (Samman 2015: 977).

To address this, we turn to Koselleck's (1988) foundational insight that a crisis must be both an objective condition and a perceived reality to be consequential. This dual character is central to Gramsci's thought, which distinguishes between fleeting, conjunctural crises and profound, organic ones (Babic 2020). For Gramsci (1971), an organic crisis permeates the entire socio-political structure; it is not merely an economic breakdown but equally a crisis of subjectivity and authority. This was powerfully demonstrated by Stuart Hall in his analysis of the British state, which showed how crises are lived, interpreted and contested (see for instance Hall 1988). This contestation around crises makes them sites of 'decisive intervention' (Hay 1999) and strategic contestation (Hall 1988). In this way, crises are both objects of description of what is occurring and prescription about a way forward (Gilbert 2019), which will frame interventions and ensuing contestation. Jessop (2015) advances a critical realist approach that characterises crisis as a moment of objective overdetermination, where multiple contradictions converge to disrupt a system's reproduction, and subjective indeterminacy, where the path forward is radically open. This subjectivity is captured by the axiom that 'crises are what agents make of them' (Samman 2015: 977) without overemphasising the subjectivity of a crisis conjuncture. That is, while a concatenation of crisis claims stands as the primary evidence for widespread crisis, this discursive space of crisis claims-making is not free floating; it is structurally and strategically constrained by the objectivity of the situation. A brief note: while our approach here resembles the logic of Gilbert's (2019) 'crisis paradigm' in which modern social and political theory is characterised by diagnostic descriptions and prognostic prescription, ours is more temporally constrained and focused in particular on the current crisis conjuncture or concatenation.

Drawing from these authors, we can define crisis as a spatio-temporal situation of 'dysfunctional reproduction' that inaugurates threat and 'uncertainty' in 'agentively indeterminate' ways (hence descriptions and prescriptions of the situation differ), so witnessing 'strategic contestation' over its resolution. This syncretic definition guides our chapter. The analysis of crises must heed the real complexity and possible interconnectedness of different crises, particularly in contexts of concatenated crisis claims. The current global conjuncture is precisely such a context. It goes by many names: the polycrisis, metacrisis, interregnum and crisis of liberal international or world order—and domestic political crises reflect

and inflect, unevenly, this globalised reality (Gontijo 2025). Unfortunately, the burgeoning crisis literature is largely seablind and, with some exceptions, the growing sea-aware scholarship risks overlooking the current globalised condition of crisis by remaining tied to existing theories and explanatory frameworks that themselves are crisis-blind. We interrogate this in the following section.

As we argue in the remainder of the chapter the promising trajectory of sea-aware scholarship must be brought together with the temporally sensitive crisis literature, with a specific focus on Africa. We do not propose a particular substantive path; instead, we urge for a greater critical awareness among policymakers and academics of the present, global situation. Analytically and normatively, there is great potential in merging sea-awareness and crisis-awareness. As we show further below, centring ocean regions[3], rather than states or territorialities, as units or nodes of analysis helps to curb state- and terra-centrism that may detract from the analysis of a concrete crisis conjuncture in more comprehensive, sea-aware terms. The 'terraqueous' (Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025: 95) analytical concept of ocean regions enables an appreciation of the interconnectedness and complexity of 'apparent' crises. 'Terraqueous' refers to the inextricable interconnectedness between landmasses and bodies of water. An analytical appreciation of complex interconnectedness is particularly crucial in the crisis-laden present of uncertainty, where reliance on older frameworks, institutions and processes may intensify under-preparedness.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF OCEAN GOVERNANCE

This section argues that the ocean is implicated in the crisis of the liberal international order because the seas have long been governed through those same liberal-internationalist, 'universal' ideas that no longer align with material realities. The maritime space has been central to liberal hegemony: sea lanes have sustained global capitalism, freedom of navigation has enabled liberal trade, the seabed has been constituted as a global common, and maritime law has converted power into legitimacy. Today, however, the multilateral institutions and rule-based arrangements underpinning the US-led order no longer reliably produce

[3] The crisis literature does sometimes examine maritime affairs, but as supplementary to more 'landed' global shifts. The net result is a terra-centric (Schoeman and Wu 2022) conception of the crisis. On the other hand, aspects of the crisis of the liberal international order otherwise noted in the overtly crisis-focused literature are frequently present in the growing sea-aware literature (Steinberg 2022; Verhoeven 2022 ; Bueger and Mallin 2023; ACSUS-ORP 2025: 57-59; Ingimundarson, Chapter 3 in this Volume) but are not always linked to an overarching analytical framework of crisis. Our point is that both domains must be brought out and illuminated more clearly as interconnected imperatives in addressing maritime matters (on the one hand) in the current conjuncture (on the other).

consent, predictability or restraint at sea[4]. Hegemony, understood as intellectual and moral leadership through which dominant interests are universalised and consent secured, does not collapse while institutions persist, but when their legitimating capacity erodes (Gramsci 1971, Cox 1981, Stahl 2019). From this perspective, the contemporary crisis at sea is not institutional failure but hegemonic exhaustion. What is emerging is not the breakdown of governance, but its mutation from US-led coordination to fragmentation[5], coercion, bilateralism[6], legal instrumentalism and informal arrangements. This shift signals an organic crisis of liberal maritime order rather than its demise.

The maritime domain exposes this crisis with particular clarity—and in doing so, reveals the limits of IR as a discipline. It is common cause that IR has been a pathological 'landlubber discipline': either refusing to deal with the sea or treating it as land (de Carvalho and Leira 2022). Its core concepts—sovereignty, borders, territoriality—remain anchored in landed assumptions[7] that poorly translate to a fluid, multi-scalar and inherently transboundary domain (Liu and Molina 2021; Campbell et al. 2016). Oceans are constituted by overlapping jurisdictions, layered legal regimes and heterogeneous actors operating across spaces that rarely correspond to state boundaries. When IR forces maritime realities into its landed conceptual vocabulary, analytical distortions are not incidental; they are structural. Liberal institutionalism exemplifies this problem. By conceptualising hegemony primarily as material leadership that facilitates cooperation through institutions, it explains why liberal maritime regimes persist, but not why their authority is increasingly contested. This limitation is particularly evident in ocean governance. As Li and Li (2026) show, the liberal principle of freedom of the high seas was never a neutral ideal. Historically, maritime space was organised through corridors of jurisdiction and layered sovereignties that privileged powerful maritime actors. UNCLOS did not disrupt this logic. It rationalised and institutionalised it, transforming competitive freedom into a managed system that constrained anarchy while legitimising the extension of state power and market logics into the global commons (Li and Li 2026:3).

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[4] As noted in the introduction of this Volume, ocean regions are defined as units of analysis for examining power relations whose formation and maintenance are mainly driven by dynamics rooted in and across the oceans (see also Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025: 100).

[5] Here see Lausen and Buerkert (2025) who engage with fragmentation as an analytical framework for governance effectiveness. They particularly distinguish between synergistic, cooperative and conflictive fragmentation.

[6] Trump's so-called Liberation Day tariffs exemplify the return of transactional bilateralisms. In the maritime context, at the time of writing, intra-NATO dynamics around the Chagos Islands also demonstrate these dynamics at sea, in a region marked by what Verhoeven (2021) calls 'thin hegemony.'

[7] Alden, Schoeman and Simão (2025: 94) highlight that 'territory' in IR has traditionally been associated with land/earth, with little regard to the oceans, even though the concept of 'territorial waters' is deeply ingrained in international law.

These contradictions are especially stark in the African maritime context. Africa's oceanic politics are shaped by colonial cartographies, asymmetrical legal regimes, limited enforcement capacity and ecological vulnerability. Colonial maritime mappings continue to structure exclusive economic zones, shipping routes, port hierarchies and salvage regimes, while global frameworks governing marine archaeology and underwater cultural heritage reproduce unequal access and ownership (Ramachela and Bizos 2025). African maritime crises must be thought of in these terms: the political economy of maritime extraction reinforces Africa's marginal position within both global governance and IR theorising.

Despite this, IR scholarship frequently retreats to the familiar categories of Cold War rivalry[8] and multipolarity[9] to interpret contemporary maritime disorder. These frameworks impose a binary, state-centric logic that poorly captures the ocean's fluid and polycentric[10] character. In African waters, what is framed as geopolitical competition is more accurately understood as the outcome of structural political economies characterised by illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, climate-driven ecological stress and vulnerabilities created by dependent port, energy and logistics infrastructures. Cold War metaphors thus offer rhetorical clarity at the cost of analytical accuracy, attributing crisis to rivalry while obscuring its systemic and ecological foundations. Multipolarity reproduces these limitations in diluted form. While it acknowledges the diffusion of material power, it retains the assumption that order is best understood through the distribution of capabilities among major states. Yet maritime power rarely maps neatly onto land-based indicators. Fisheries enforcement, port logistics, surveillance infrastructures and environmental governance often matter more than military assets. Moreover, many decisive actors in African maritime politics—industrial trawler fleets, offshore energy corporations, cable-laying firms, and criminal networks—are not poles of power at all, but nodes within dispersed and overlapping networks of extraction and governance. We live in a world in which nodal forms of governance are commonplace. Burris, Drahos and Shearing (2005) suggest that nodal governance is an elaboration of contemporary network theory, and they explain how a variety of actors operating within social systems interact along networks to govern the systems they inhabit. Nodes

[8] Barry Buzan has recently argued for Cold War as a general analytical concept for IR in order to understand the twenty-first century world order and even goes as far as suggesting that the Second Cold War is already upon us—albeit that the latter is being fought differently from the First, and also uniquely influenced by the shared-fate threat of climate change (Buzan 2024: 239).

[9] Multipolarity traditionally refers to an international system with multiple power centres, or 'poles,' that possess roughly equal capabilities in military, economic and political influence. Multipolar systems are often characterised by intense competition, alliances and shifting balances of power (Çeviköz 2025).

[10] Polycentrism, on the other hand, denotes a system where multiple centres of power exist but are not equal regarding their influence, reach or capacities. This concept has its roots in governance theory but has gained traction in international relations. Unlike the rigid structure of multipolarity, polycentrism emphasises the diversity and fluidity of power dynamics, acknowledging the interconnected yet asymmetric nature of global influence (Çeviköz 2025).

govern in a wide variety of ways, including by mobilising resources, deploying technologies, using rules or laws and directly governing people within the system.

The persistence of Cold War and multipolar framings is therefore symptomatic of a deeper epistemic crisis within IR. The crisis of the maritime domain is not merely one of instability or threat, but of the intellectual apparatus used to explain it. Recognising this crisis as an organic and potentially generative moment thus creates space for alternative approaches to maritime politics. What is required are approaches that foreground relationality, material systems, ecological processes and historically embedded inequalities. In this sense, the ocean is not only where liberal order and IR theory falter, but where their analytical limits are most clearly revealed.

Fortunately, advances have been made in this regard. Bueger and Mallin (2023) have argued that the oceans have undergone a profound shift in the ideas through which they are understood politically, identifying four emergent blue paradigms—maritime security, the blue economy, ocean health and blue justice—that have elevated the oceans to a new priority area in global politics. They caution, however, that this 'ocean revolution' is far from unidirectional; rather, 'security, economic, environmental or normative ideas pull global ocean politics and research into different directions, often with competing priorities and objectives' (Bueger and Mallin 2023: 2). Along similar lines, Alden, Schoeman and Simão (2025) explore the possibilities of developing a more inclusive approach to IR theory that integrates ocean governance into its core analytical precepts. Our contribution builds on these developments but argues that sea-awareness requires an explicit theoretical awareness of crisis, just as accounts of the contemporary crisis must take the maritime domain seriously.

THE CRISIS IN/OF/AND AFRICAN SEAS

This section examines four aspects of the maritime dimension of the liberal international order crisis, refracted through a focus on Africa's maritime surroundings. The first two cases, related to IUU fishing in the Gulf of Guinea and island disputes in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), respectively, have to do with the dysfunctional reproducibility of UNCLOS as the preeminent ocean governance framework. The third case examines the spatial interconnectedness of ostensibly separate crises when centring ocean regions instead of state- and terra-centrism (Schoeman and Wu 2022). The final case regards the ongoing 'for science' geopoliticisation of the Southern Ocean and Antarctica, despite the frozen status of claims, as a neglected African maritime domain (ACSUS-

ORP 2025: 53–57). These cases demonstrate the broad scope of the maritime dimension of the crisis as regards Africa.

UNCLOS unclear I: Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

Established in 1982 and often described as the constitution of the oceans, UNCLOS created an expansive legal framework governing maritime space, including Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and coastal state rights (Bateman 2006: 1). Yet its capacity to reproduce itself effectively has proven weak, particularly in addressing IUU fishing. Despite a layered international regime, combining UNCLOS, Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO)-led initiatives, regional mechanisms and national enforcement, IUU fishing persists, most visibly in the Gulf of Guinea (Okafor-Yarwood 2020: 117). This persistence reflects a deeper unevenness in the rules-based multilateral order: while UNCLOS grants coastal states sovereign rights over their EEZs, chronic underfunding of enforcement capacities renders these rights largely symbolic (Ani 2023: 116). Foreign industrial fleets—key non-state maritime actors—exploit this enforcement gap through flags of convenience, opaque ownership structures and dubious access agreements, routinely under-reporting catches, fishing in prohibited zones and encroaching on artisanal grounds. The result is a dual injustice: ecological depletion of marine ecosystems and severe socio-economic harm to coastal fishing communities. Even more telling is the difficulty in updating a dysfunctional UNCLOS. The reality is that piecemeal additions, such as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement (also known as the 'High Seas Treaty'), require decades of negotiations. Its negotiated, piecemeal character leaves the core structures of UNCLOS untouched, reinforcing uncertainty rather than repair (see MARIPOLDATA 2022). It appears that UNCLOS cannot be renegotiated or replaced in the current geopolitical climate, especially in the context of science-disguised geopolitical performances (see further below), and its sub-optimal reproducibility means that its weaknesses cannot be systematically repaired. In this sense, IUU fishing and related ecosystemic destruction is not only a technical governance failure but an expression of UNCLOS's inability to reproduce enforceable authority under conditions of global power asymmetry. However, as Lausen and Buerkert (2025) argue, such fragmentary logics can be the springboard for governance: crisis can signal opportunity (Jessop 2015).

UNCLOS unclear II: Boundary disputes

The crisis of UNCLOS is also evident in unresolved maritime boundary disputes. UNCLOS was drafted in a geopolitical era that no longer resembles today's strategic environment. Despite creating an expansive legal regime, its practical performance has fallen short in terms of the persistence and intensification of maritime disputes (Paya Santos et al. 2025: 424; Strating 2019); the unevenness of enforcing arbitration and adjudication, including non-compliance and the absence of an enforcement mechanism attached to UNCLOS (Vaangal 2022); unanticipated geopolitical, technological and environmental developments since the drafting of UNCLOS; and ongoing legal fragmentation through creeping jurisdiction. As states increasingly push for extended continental shelves or reinterpret navigational rights, they produce inconsistent precedents, and, rather than harmonising claims, they strategically manipulate the convention's ambiguity, further fragmenting ocean governance.

This dysfunctional reproduction of UNCLOS is also evident in the surrounding islands in the WIO. Africa hosts a high number of overlapping maritime claims (Okonkwo 2017: 57), a dilemma especially pronounced in the Mozambique Channel, where small islands and narrow maritime spaces intensify contestation (Jamine 2007: 27). Article 15 of UNCLOS provides for median-line delimitation between adjacent or opposite coasts, subject to historic title or special circumstances, yet this provision has failed to resolve sovereignty disputes over the Scattered Islands. France occupies a central position in these conflicts, maintaining control over several former colonial territories while exercising caution toward compulsory dispute settlement under Articles 297 and 298 (UNCLOS 1982: 132–134). Beyond sovereignty, these islands confer access to extensive maritime zones, resource extraction rights and regional institutional membership, amplifying their strategic value. As external power involvement has deepened recently around the Chagos Islands (O'Shaughnessy 2025: 49), UNCLOS has proven unable to reconcile competing interpretations, historic claims, geopolitical interests and emergent developments around new types of actors, technologies and ecological destruction. The persistence of such disputes underscores not only the limits of Article 15 but also the broader inability of UNCLOS to stabilise maritime order in strategically contested regions, not least its inability to mediate unanticipated developments. Here again, uncertainty reigns as the morbid scion of fragmentation, revealing an international maritime legal order struggling to reproduce legitimacy and authority in a rapidly transforming environment.

Beyond terra-centrism: Ocean regions, interconnectedness and complexity

As noted above, the analytical concept of ocean regions enables a re-specification of crises by foregrounding the interconnectivity of events that appear territorially discrete when viewed through a land-bounded optic. A major hallmark of the crisis of the liberal international order, long conceptualised in terra-centric terms, is the emergent cleavage structure dividing national populists from liberal internationalists (Babic 2020). Within this frame, the so-called European migrant crisis of 2015 is narrated either as an existential threat in exclusionary populist discourse or as a humanitarian emergency in liberal anti-populist accounts (Moffitt 2018). This Eurocentric discursive terrain obscures a more fundamental reality: what is framed as a crisis in Europe is in fact the downstream manifestation of a crisis—or, more accurately, an ensemble of crises—of human security, governance failure and existential threat originating across mainland Africa, materially enacted through perilous crossings of the Sahara and the Mediterranean (see Laine 2020). This case also illustrates the subjective indeterminacy of crisis. Differently positioned social actors—geographically and sociologically—experience and interpret crises in divergent ways, orienting themselves toward distinct resolutions and thereby constituting a contested field of crisis definitions, imaginaries and strategies of response. Attending to how the ocean physically and politically links disparate land regions—that is, adopting a terraqueous approach (Alden, Schoeman and Simão 2025: 95)—undermines reductive claims about the origins of social ills. Enhanced sea-awareness is thus a necessary precondition for adequately grasping and addressing the dysfunctional patterns of reproduction around migration that have become a key point of political contention in Europe. Put differently, to take the ocean seriously—both materially and politically—is to take complex spatial interconnectedness seriously, thereby mitigating the 'morbid symptoms' (Gramsci 1971) of exclusionary populism, the intellectual morbidity of terra-centrism and the persistent Eurocentrism of dominant crisis discourses.

Forgotten but not gone: The geopolitical thawing of the South Pole

A final maritime aspect of the crisis we wish to briefly discuss concerns the Southern Ocean. South Africa's tri-oceanic geography is often overlooked, with maritime domain awareness of the Southern Ocean lagging far behind the 'two oceans' narrative (Atlantic and Indian). Daniela Bianka Marggraff and Vishal

Surbun's joint presentation at the 2025 ORP conference, hosted in collaboration with the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) at the University of Pretoria, problematised ongoing 'for science' projects in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean as Trojan Horses for securitisation and militarisation (ACSUS-ORP 2025: 53-57). Atop the 'frozen' claims of the Antarctic Treaty, such geopolitical performances and practices operationalised through science-based initiatives by non-African external players signal the erosion of the 'foundational principle of Antarctica as a continent devoted to peace and science' (ACSUS-ORP 2025: 59). In crisis terms, the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS)[11], and its wider maritime mediation by the UNCLOS, is in a state of dysfunctional reproduction and is the site of science-disguised geopolitical contention, ushering in threat and uncertainty about the prospects for the 'last great wilderness' (ACSUS-ORP 2025: 59). African maritime agency, discussed below, specifically as regards the Combined Exclusive Maritime Zone for Africa (CEMZA), must heed the Southern Ocean as a site of strategic contention where the 'old' order of the ATS, a product of post-war multilateralism, is giving way to a tumultuous present and uncertain future.

SEA-AWARE AFRICAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT/CRISIS-AWARE AFRICAN OCEAN GOVERNANCE

During crises, strategic contestation ensues. Actors' orientation to the conditions of crisis—their construal and prescriptions or post-crisis visions—is thus a key consideration, analytically and politically. In this penultimate section, we briefly diagnose some pitfalls related to the notion of African maritime crisis management and explore some possibilities in this regard.

At the third colloquium of the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) at the University of Pretoria, AU Commissioner, Hon. Kathleen Ayensu, spoke to the immense difficulties of reconciling policy formulation with implementation around African 'Blue agency' (see ORP 2024: 20-22). Africa's maritime potential is reflected in frameworks like the Lomé Charter and the CEMZA, but an air of pessimism reigns: 'The AU's Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy [AIMS 2050] is a wish list with no realistic or practical steps to its realisation' (Lekunze 2022: 2852). At stake here is the reproduction of current initiatives and ongoing practices:

[11] The ATS comprised of 'interlinked conventions, measures and recommendations, founded upon the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, has proved to be one of the successes of contemporary international law and diplomacy' (Triggs 2011: 39–40). Triggs's optimism must be rethought in light of our discussion.

> "The renationalisation of global politics, coupled with emerging civilisational paradigms, underscores the tension between cooperation and competition in managing shared maritime resources. Africa's historical role in shaping the Law of the Sea is juxtaposed against its current struggles with uneven development, resource exploitation, and climate crises, as reflected in the slow progress of initiatives like AIMS 2050 and the Lomé Charter. The urgency of tackling climate change and ensuring equitable resource use is complicated by the dominance of state-centric practices, the long timelines of international lawmaking, and the political shifts on the global stage" (ORP 2024: 26).

We argue that this situation can only be tackled appropriately by integrating two urgent temporal imperatives: sea-awareness and crisis-awareness. In the African context in particular, this requires strategic innovation. Such strategies can take many forms, for crisis can be a moment of opportunity (Jessop 2015). In the strategic field that is the WIO, and considering the influence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) powers in a region in which China and India are key actors, Mauritius can leverage its geographical positioning, including its vast EEZ, as a major undersea cable node or chokepoint (see ORP 2023: 6–11). Indeed, the WIO is the site of successful maritime models, such as the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles and Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar, demonstrating that islands in the WIO are better positioned than mainland Africa to lead collective efforts at ocean governance. Of course, this positioning is potentially undermined by the efforts of external players in the same region, particularly in relation to the Chagos Islands (Boffey 2026). External players, such as France, via Réunion, can also solicit the maritime geography of Mauritius, or leverage the goodwill of its recently reinforced bilateral ties with China (Wong 2026), backgrounded by the US neocolonial orientation to the Arctic Ocean region (ORP-ACSUS 2025: 52) and trepidatious NATO dynamics, in its bid to secure further influence in the WIO region. Or, like China[12], Mauritius or Réunion (France) can explore the possibility of building artificial islands to better secure the undersea cables that knot beneath its EEZs, exchanging usage of the latter for Chinese technologies that can achieve the former. These tentative examples are illustrative and speculative, rather than prescriptive: the point is that a range of possibilities exist that can be strategically negotiated and pursued, taking seriously the stakes of the current conjuncture.

[12] China has built islands in the SCS, a form of 'disruptive innovation' that 'has been accompanied by a concerted effort on the part of the Chinese state to deploy legal resources to challenge and unsettle the existing legal order at sea' (Bueger, Edmunds and Ryan 2019: 976).

Innovation can also build on existing maritime frameworks like the CEMZA, itself a product of African multilateralism, which can be dated back to UNCLOS III in 1982, where African states' 'lack of experience was no impediment to the extent, scope or quality of their participation and contributions' (Surbun 2021: 14; see also ORP 2024: 20–22). Without always framing them in terms of crisis (management), the sort of innovations required to face the crisis and shape its destiny have been explored at each of the ORP events hosted at the University of Pretoria between 2022 and 2025. For example, at the 2025 iteration of the ORP event, hosted in collaboration with ACSUS, Kaboub's keynote presentation spoke to the possibility of a 'geopolitical bargain of the century' whereby a (yet-undefined) grouping of African states can potentially leverage the continent's resources by approaching both the US and China and offering long-term investment horizons that mutually benefit both external players and Africa, given its hedging position (see ACSUS-ORP 2025: 4).

Our point is this: in the present conjuncture, sea-aware African Blue agency must take the form of collaborative and coherent crisis management strategies. Crucially, the liberal international order is not the sole arbiter of mutual interest-based international arrangements that may achieve this goal: 'There are … many shared interests among competing great powers that could form the bases of new arrangements among them' (Steinberg 2022: 30). Moreover, the playing field is not limited to great powers; as we have explored in this section, smaller actors—including 'Large Ocean States' (as the sea-aware inverse of the terra-centric conception of Small Island Developing States, see Marggraff, Chapter 8 in Part II; ORP 2024: 38–48)—may pursue interests by exchanging unique capacities (like extensive EEZs and geographical positioning of smaller islands, islets and atolls) for benefits as they navigate the turbulent waters of a world order in crisis. For Jessop (2015), sound crisis management begins with a careful analysis of the selective interactions between structural conditions, discursive practices, technological capacities and political agency. The forms that crisis management ultimately take emerge through processes of variation, selection and retention, meaning that they are constrained by objective conditions without being mechanically determined by them, while equally avoiding purely voluntaristic or arbitrary interpretations (Jessop 2015: 267). Consequently, crises do not contain ready-made solutions; instead, they require the strategic construction of new political arrangements as older forms of order lose their capacity to reproduce themselves (Hall 1988; Gramsci 1971). Through creativity, agency and appropriate strategies that adequately 'select' for (Jessop 2015) the objective contours of the crisis of ocean governance, including that of the climate (see Otto

and Rydberg, Chapter 6 in this Volume), 'good order at sea' (Vreÿ 2010) can be achieved once again.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows that contemporary instability in the maritime domain is inseparable from the broader crisis of the US-led liberal internationalism. While its dynamics are acutely visible at sea, as we have tried to show, they are not always considered in terms of a 'crisis of world order, an interregnum'. This chapter has attempted to rectify this issue by arguing that sea-awareness must 'talk about the interregnum' (Babic 2020) and indeed that 'interregnum-' or crisis-talk cannot be sea-blind. Theoretically and analytically, the chapter advances a syncretic crisis lens that treats crisis as a condition of dysfunctional reproduction marked by objective pressures and subjective indeterminacy. Applying this lens to Africa reveals how sea-blind and Eurocentric framings misrecognise interconnected crises, from migration to ocean governance. In particular, UNCLOS exemplifies the crisis of ocean governance through dysfunctional reproduction: while its legal architecture endures, it struggles to adapt or enforce authority, most visibly in the persistence of IUU fishing, unresolved maritime boundary disputes and the growing strain on the ATS in the Southern Ocean. This produces uncertainty, as legal ambiguity, non-compliance and piecemeal reforms fragment governance rather than stabilise it. These failures translate into threat, manifest in ecological depletion, livelihood insecurity, irregular migration and the creeping securitisation and militarisation of polar spaces. At the same time, UNCLOS ambiguities enable strategic contestation, as states and non-state actors exploit enforcement gaps, jurisdictional overlap and science-based legal and geopolitical instrumentalism.

Together, these dynamics reveal a condition of complexity, shaped by overlapping regimes, heterogeneous actors and ecological change, and of interconnectedness, whereby fisheries collapse, migration, polar geopolitics and maritime security crises are materially concatenated across ocean regions—underscoring the maritime domain as a central site of global disorder. The maritime domain is therefore not merely another arena in which the crisis of world order unfolds; it is one of the principal sites through which that crisis can be understood, interpreted and strategically navigated.

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CHAPTER THREE

NARRATING ARCTIC GEOPOLITICS AND GOVERNANCE: THE EMPLOTMENT AND UNRAVELLING OF EXCEPTIONALISM

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INTRODUCTION

As an ocean largely enclosed by the Earth's northernmost landmasses, the Arctic has historically been extremely difficult to inhabit, navigate and exploit due to its perennial sea ice cover (Barry and Hall-McKim 2018). Yet, while nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century plans for Arctic imperial conquest, scientific exploration and economic exploitation were not motivated by modern notions of sovereignty, they became increasingly entangled with possession claims and expansionism (McCannon 2012). These projects varied markedly by state, ranging from British efforts to force imperial sea routes through ice (Williams 2009) and Russian attempts to integrate the Arctic as an internal frontier (McCannon 1998), to Norwegian scientific strategies of adaptation coupled with jurisdictional regional aspirations (Bravo 2018) and Canadian pursuit of territorial administrative control (Lackenbauer 2020). This conjunction of discovery and dominion has clear parallels with earlier imperial sea-route projects in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, even if the Arctic's ice made them less immediately practicable. The Arctic subsequently emerged as a key theatre for wartime logistics and military operations during the Second World War. This was particularly consequential for the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany, for whom Arctic routes, airfields and ports became vital to the movement of military forces as well as convoy operations (Boyd 2024). After the onset of the Cold War, the region became a 'frozen' strategic buffer zone between the United States and the Soviet Union as part of

their global confrontation and central to their nuclear war plans (Bocking and Roberts 2023). It was not until the post-Cold War period—within the context of a geopolitical paradigm change—that questions about multilateral regional governance and cooperation in the Arctic gained traction (Young 1998). This delay reflected the Arctic's status as a region of permanent human habitation and overlapping sovereign jurisdictions, which stood in marked contrast to Antarctica's earlier treatment as an uninhabited, demilitarised space governed through the international treaty regime. The predicted environmental impacts of climate change on the Arctic also produced future-oriented, material state discourses. Russia, Denmark/Greenland and Canada, for example, foregrounded the extension of continental shelves and the prospect of natural resource extraction, while Russia and Canada additionally emphasised the opening of new sea lanes.

Since the Cold War, Arctic geopolitical and governance trajectories have commonly been interpreted through a dialectic interaction between conflict and cooperation (Dittmer et al. 2011; Østhagen 2024). This dynamic has been theorised from both a neorealist perspective—focusing on the international system and national security imperatives—and a liberal institutionalist one, which privileges intergovernmental collaboration and the role of regional institutions. Such approaches echo official narratives of the eight Arctic states—Russia, Canada, the United States, Denmark on behalf of Greenland, Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden—which portray, often in linear terms, the Arctic as a strategic frontier during the Cold War, a 'zone of peace' in the post-Cold War era and a site of renewed, if managed, Great Power rivalry in the present.

In this chapter, I explore how such chronopolitical narratives based on the ordering and mobilisation of time to legitimise political claims and interventions have been framed, articulated and instrumentalised (Esposito and Becker 2023; Klinke 2012). The purpose is to explain how 'temporal sovereignty', or the authority to define historical transitions, has shaped and recast the region since the Cold War (Davis 2008). I chart how the Arctic states initially mobilised narratives about past experiences and future expectations for a dual purpose: first, to advance their own national interests in the Arctic—including jurisdictional claims, environmental protection, natural resource extraction and security policies—and second, to strive for hegemony through a collective commitment to a governance regime based on the Law of the Sea and institutionalised in the Arctic Council as the main regional intergovernmental body (Kankaanpää and Young 2012; Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015). This framework left no room for alternative imaginaries—such as those embodied

in the Antarctic Treaty—on global commons, demilitarisation or prohibition of mineral exploitation. It was also firmly wedded to the logic of sovereign authority, even though Arctic states have, to varying degrees, recognised some forms of Indigenous self-governance.

Referring to Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) theory about historical time as being layered and asynchronous, I show that Arctic temporalities are not sequential but coexist, intersect and unfold in tension, reflecting different state interests and political agendas. This understanding also illuminates what Paul Ricœur termed narrative disruptions and reconfigurations, when dominant paradigms are no longer viable, requiring revisions or alternatives (Ricœur 1984: 36–45; Ricœur 1980). Within an Arctic context, the emplotment of a stable and peaceful post-Cold War narrative of exceptionalism—which was forged in the 1990s and reinforced in the 2000s—was kept nominally, if artificially, intact during 'a narrative lag' (Ricœur 1988: 72–73, 246) from the mid-2010s onward, before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine unravelled it. At that time, future expectations had diverged too much from experiences, allowing political legacies and trajectories to reassert and manifest themselves. I argue that the transition from a conflictual Cold War logic to a cooperative post-Cold War framework in the Arctic obscured unresolved tensions between Western states and Russia, which ultimately led to narrative entropy. The result is that Arctic exceptionalism, which was intended to break from the past and offer future promise, has itself become part of what Antonio Gramsci termed an 'interregnum'. It is a historical moment in which a moribund political order is no longer able to offer stable predictions or anticipatory guidance (Gramsci 1971: 276; Cox 1981; see also Bizos et al., Chapter 2 in Part I), as Cold War, neo-imperial and neo-colonial temporalities reassert themselves through ruptures such as Russia's war on Ukraine and US territorial designs on Greenland.

TEMPORAL TRANSITIONS: NEGOTIATING COLD WAR LEGACIES AND POST-COLD WAR FUTURES

Koselleck's idea of 'crisis time' (2004: 255–260) captures how the Cold War Arctic existed within a suspended temporality—a time of military alertness and deferred political, social and economic trajectories. Governance was subordinated to Soviet-American bipolar deterrence and the prospects of a nuclear conflict. Yet colonial temporalities were also present during this period. Indigenous Arctic peoples—such as the Inuit, Sámi, Yupik and Nenets—were excluded from decisions about land and maritime use or about economic and

military projects, which affected them directly (Pika 1999). The militarisation of the Arctic included forced relocation of Indigenous populations in Greenland—a Danish colony until the early 1950s when it became a constituent part of the Kingdom of Denmark—from areas near a US base, causing major economic, cultural and social disruptions (Petersen 2011: 91–92). In the Soviet Union, the Arctic was a closed-off space with severe restrictions on human mobility; many Indigenous territories were expropriated for military installations, mining and oil and gas projects (Rowe 2009: 2–3, 131, 151; Dodds 2020: 261). While some material conditions improved, it came at the cost of autonomous rights, cultural practices and traditional livelihoods, such as hunting (Pika 1999). Indeed, the Soviet Union, Canada, the United States, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden constructed narratives that projected themselves as 'modern sovereign actors' in the Arctic, while assigning Indigenous—in a colonial language—'delayed' or 'dependent' status and depicting them as outside the exercise of sovereign modernity (Chakrabarty 2000: 8–9). A temporal framework was thus used to withhold political legitimacy.

Despite the dominant narrative of competitive bipolarity, some space remained for cooperation in the Arctic during the Cold War. Limited science collaboration in the fields of polar research and the preservation of polar bears was initiated between the Western and Soviet blocs in the 1950s and 1970s (Rowe 2009). The most important intervention was the 'Murmansk Initiative'—launched in a 1987 speech by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev—in which he pleaded for regional cooperation in the Arctic as well as for making it a 'zone of peace' (Gorbachev 1987). While Gorbachev did not explicitly refer to other ocean regions, his speech can be read in relation to earlier Cold War efforts to limit militarisation, including the Antarctic Treaty regime, the largely unrealised Indian Ocean 'zone of peace' initiative and nuclear-weapon-free zones established in Latin America and in the South Pacific (see also Seabra, Chapter 5, Part I).

This intervention provided the backdrop for a new post-Cold War cooperation narrative in the Arctic by bundling together disparate elements such as military restraint, peaceful resolution of disputes, resource exploitation, environmental protection, science cooperation and the economic potential of new shipping lanes (Devyatkin 2023). To be sure, the historical context of Gorbachev's initiative is often overlooked: that it was rooted in a period of transition in which old Soviet ideas, such as the creation of nuclear-free zones, were mixed with new ones at a time when the outcome of a Cold War thaw remained uncertain (Ingimundarson 2024). Yet it spurred a number of Arctic intergovernmental projects in the 1990s, whose main goal was to improve Russian-Western relations (Dodds 2020; Rowe 2009).

These initiatives focused on regional institution-building and were primarily driven by the five 'rim' or 'coastal' states making stakeholder claims in the Arctic Ocean: Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark (on behalf of Greenland) and Norway. The Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in 1992, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council in 1993 and the Arctic Council in 1996 (Kankaanpää and Young 2012). Made up of the five Arctic coastal states—together with the three other Arctic states, Iceland, Sweden and Finland—the Arctic Council also included 'permanent participants' from Indigenous groups and, later, extra-regional observers from states and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations (Arctic Council 2025). It was, however, not an international organisation based on a treaty but an 'intergovernmental forum' without decision-making authority. Focusing on environmental protection, sustainable development and scientific cooperation, it had no authority over maritime boundary disputes or the exploitation of natural resources. The United States further diluted its foundational document—the Ottawa Declaration—by excluding military issues from its mandate. This separation of environmental cooperation from military and security issues was common in sector-specific ocean governance elsewhere, particularly in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; by contrast, the Arctic Council brought governance of the entire ocean space into a single forum and institutionalised Indigenous participation. Some scholars, such as Oran R. Young, defended such a loose, though strictly hierarchical structure, arguing that making the Arctic Council a formal intergovernmental organisation might have sidelined its most innovative features, such as the distinctive role accorded to Indigenous representatives who have speaking, if not voting, rights (Kankaanpää and Young 2012). Still, while their standing is higher than that of the observers, their interests were subordinated to those of 'mother' states, such as Denmark and Russia.

The commitment of the Arctic states (the 'Arctic Eight') to the UN Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), which entered into force in 1994, ensured that this legal framework would play a central role in Arctic governance by establishing maritime zones and defining seabed claims within 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as well as potential extensions of continental shelves up to 350 miles. UNCLOS has enabled similarly expansive jurisdictional seascapes in parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, particularly for 'large ocean states' whose EEZs—and, in some cases, extended continental shelves—reach far offshore (see Marggraff, Chapter 8, in Part II). The Arctic states—especially, the Arctic Five—used the Law of the Sea to establish a dominant position in the Arctic based on sovereign EEZ rights, which they viewed as a continuation of their

historical presence through earlier polar exploration rooted in scientific, imperial and nationalist agendas. They also succeeded in making the Arctic Council the central intergovernmental forum in the Arctic (Ingimundarson 2014; Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017). Observer states, such as Britain, France, China and Japan—as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, such as the Nordic Council of Ministers and the World Wildlife Fund—are explicitly required to 'recognize Arctic States' sovereign rights and jurisdiction in the Arctic' (Arctic Council 2025).

By referring to the Law of the Sea and the Arctic Council, the Arctic Five and Eight further sought to assert 'ontological sovereignty' over the Arctic by seeking legitimisation of norms around authority, space and resources (Wood-Donnelly 2025). They managed, for example, to prevent proposals—put forward by non-governmental organisations and transnational bodies such as the European Parliament in the late 2000s—to negotiate an Arctic Treaty, like the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, in which the region would be turned into a scientific preserve and sanctuary (European Parliament 2008). To the Arctic Eight, such a treaty would infringe on sovereign claims in the Arctic region and undermine the authority of the Arctic Council (Magnússon 2015). Hence, they also rejected the notion of an Arctic 'commons', or treating the region—especially spaces beyond national jurisdiction—as a shared domain managed co-operatively or as part of 'a common heritage of mankind', rather than as an area carved up solely for state interests. Outside the Arctic, the commons idea is more often narrowed in practice rather than rejected outright, as governance beyond national jurisdiction in the Indian and Pacific Oceans has tended to evolve through sectoral regimes that prioritise access, allocation and control. On the initiative of the United States, the Arctic Five were instrumental in the conclusion of a Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement in 2018, which was justified as a precautionary measure against future unregulated fishing in an Arctic area outside the EEZ of Arctic states. Yet it also restricted access and decision-making to a select group—the Arctic Five plus China, Japan, South Korea, Iceland and the European Union (EU)—excluding broader international and Indigenous participation (Molenaar 2016). In short, Arctic governance shifted from Cold War militarisation and Indigenous exclusion toward post–Cold War cooperation, while remaining firmly structured around state sovereignty and governance frameworks that privileged Arctic states' control over resources, authority and decision-making.

Similar dynamics could be seen in other ocean regions where the end of the Cold War likewise enabled expanded cooperation and new governance arrangements without displacing a sovereign-driven maritime order. In the Indian and Pacific

Oceans, coastal states—such as India, Australia and South Africa—and island states, including Mauritius, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, exercise jurisdiction over expansive EEZs and, in some cases, extended continental shelves that project far into open-ocean space (Chan 2018; Marggraff 2025). These practices similarly dilute commons-based governance of areas beyond national jurisdiction, even though governance in these regions remains institutionally fragmented without a centralized authority like the Arctic Council. Moreover, no pre-emptive agreement—like that covering the Arctic Ocean, governing future-oriented access to areas—has been made in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Instead, states have relied on reactive, sectoral regimes built around pre-existing uses through regional fisheries bodies, such as the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (Gjerde, Wright and Durussel 2021).

FRAMING AN EXCEPTIONALIST ARCTIC NARRATIVE

In the 1990s, the construction of a reified narrative of Arctic cooperation, which cast the region as 'stable' and 'peaceful', was underpinned by the Arctic states' regional dominance and reinforced by the Arctic Council's non-military mandate. Koselleck's concept of 'shifting expectations', wherein historical actors reorient their horizons of possibility to respond to geopolitical changes, illuminates this transition in Arctic imaginaries (Koselleck 2004: 255–256). However, the new narrative failed to garner significant global attention, as the Arctic remained a geopolitical sideshow in the aftermath of the Cold War. Thus, despite participating in Arctic institution-building, the Russian government—under President Boris Yeltsin—viewed the region as a financial liability rather than a source of economic riches or geopolitical value and paid scant attention to its environmental degradation or social problems (Sergunin 2021: 117). Russia's priorities centred instead on consolidating political power, responding to economic crises, fighting separatist movements and redefining its post-Soviet international role.

The Arctic did not figure prominently in the foreign policy agendas of either the United States or Western European states, which were preoccupied with integrating Eastern European states into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU, as well as with the wars in the former Yugoslavia. There was, to be sure, a genuine Western interest in reaping the benefits of the 'peace dividend' by collaborating with Russia. Yet the 1990s were as much about Cold War legacies, such as NATO's eastward expansion and military interventions

in Bosnia and Kosovo, which sowed discord between the West and Russia, as they were about a peaceful post-Cold War future. Indeed, Western focus on environmental initiatives in the Arctic partly stemmed from past efforts to clean up Soviet-era nuclear waste, particularly from the Northern Fleet, Russia's principal Arctic naval formation (Sawhill 2000).

When the debate over climate change became more prominent in the early 2000s, conditions in the Arctic captured global interest. The Arctic was already warming at more than twice the global average, with rapidly declining sea ice extent and thawing permafrost. This interest was, however, not only sparked by environmental concerns—such as loss of sea ice—but also by perceived economic opportunities tied to the opening of new shipping lanes, which would shorten transit times between Asia and Europe and to natural resource extraction. Such discourses promised 'future returns'—for example, through the commercial use of the Northern Sea Route or hydrocarbon development in Greenland and Arctic offshore areas. Yet they interacted uneasily with competing environmental and societal discourses, stressing the frailty of the Arctic's ecosystems, the impact of economic activity on global warming and disruptions of Indigenous peoples' modes of subsistence (Heininen and Nicol 2007). This tension over expectations destabilised the dominant Arctic narrative, resulting in the adoption of a postponement strategy that delayed concrete action while maintaining the rhetoric of collaboration.

Thus, the George W. Bush administration—preoccupied with military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001—believed that the time to invest geopolitically and economically in the Arctic had not arrived. Exercising 'temporal sovereignty'—what Kathleen Davis (2008: 4–7, 66–72) defines as a political technology for controlling time—it established a deferred 'scientific timeline'. It wanted to determine on its own when to channel resources into the Arctic in the 2030s or 2040s, based on when the effects of climate change would be sufficiently pronounced (Interviews with US defence officials 2009). As was the case during the Cold War, strategic patience was called for in a region marked by unrealised future potentials. Focusing on environmental issues, the United States opted for a low geopolitical profile in the Arctic, which it maintained until after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In contrast, Russian President Vladimir Putin departed from Yeltsin's disinterest in the Arctic in the 2000s, making it part of his political agenda to recentralise power at home and to elevate Russia's historical role as a Great Power (Lynch 2016; Grajewski 2017: 143, 155–156). Russia did not deny that climate change was occurring in the Arctic, but in

a throwback to a Soviet past, its policy prioritised economic exploitation, not environmental preservation (Grajewski 2017; Pay and Calvo 2020). It was about consolidating territorial claims in offshore Arctic areas and about boosting the region's contribution to the Russian economy (Schneider 2018; Sergunin 2021). Rejecting Yeltsin's oscillation between integrating with the West and balancing it, Putin also embarked on a confrontational geopolitical course. His 2007 Munich speech—in which he sharply criticised US unilateralism and NATO expansion—confirmed this shift from post-Cold War cooperation (Stent 2014; Sakwa 2017).

In the Arctic, this was symbolised by the theatrical Russian act in the summer of 2007, of planting a titanium flag on the Lomonosov Ridge beneath the North Pole, suggesting ownership of an area also partly claimed by Denmark and Canada. The flag-planting was likely intended as much for domestic political consumption as for international posturing, to highlight Russia's scientific prowess with a feat even compared to the US moon landing (Parfitt 2007). It spurred, however, inflated global media accounts of a 'Scramble for the Arctic' and predictions of Great Power rivalry, raising the spectre of an imperialist revival symbolised by the Scramble for Africa during the nineteenth century (Borgerson 2008; Borgerson 2009; Sale and Potapov 2010), when various European nations made competing claims to African territory during the 'new imperialism' period from the 1880s to the First World War. Such a portrayal of Arctic geopolitical tensions did not suit the interests of the Arctic states, which continued to favour the existing regional political and legal framework. It explains why the Arctic Five issued the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, in which they committed themselves to the Law of the Sea and the 'orderly settlement' of overlapping claims in the Arctic Ocean (Arctic Ocean Conference 2008). The unresolved maritime claims between the Arctic Five centred at that time on the extended continental shelf, with Canada, Denmark and Russia all asserting rights to the North Pole region, Canada and the United States contesting maritime boundaries in the Beaufort Sea, and Denmark and Canada disagreeing over the small Hans Island in the Nares Strait. Yet, in all cases, there was no urgency to settle these disputes because they were about future material opportunities.

The Ilulissat Declaration provided the backdrop for the framing of the region as 'exceptionalist'—or outside the framework of Great Power rivalries elsewhere (Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017; Devyatkin 2023). It also suggested a direct link to Gorbachev's 'zone of peace' idea and a continuous, linear post-Cold War temporality (Gorbachev 1987). This reconfirmation of a cooperative Arctic narrative could not mask the contentious relationship between Russia and the West in other geopolitical arenas. The tension between what Koselleck termed

'space of experience'—or sedimented past structures that accumulate rather than disappear—and the 'horizon of expectation', or a projected future, was not resolved (Koselleck 2004: 255–256, 260). Time remained continuous and did not transition to a new 'historical' era because the expectations of peace and stability never diverged from experiences shaped by a conflictual military logic (Koselleck 2004: 260, 276). Still, what prevented the area from becoming a source of confrontation was temporal in nature. Reflecting future-oriented discourses on the Arctic, it would take decades before sea routes—such as the Northern Sea Route or a transpolar route—would become navigable year-round, and the region's harsh terrain would remain a major obstacle to natural resource extraction (Schneider 2018). Moreover, the hegemony of the Arctic states in the region—based on the Law of the Sea and the Arctic Council—could be undermined if cooperation broke down.

The international legal framework aligned with the objectives of all the Arctic states. Apart from establishing a 200-mile EEZ, UNCLOS authorised coastal states, such as Canada and Russia, which were keen on controlling the Northwest Passage and the Northern Sea Route, respectively, to enforce environmental laws in ice-covered areas within their EEZs to prevent marine pollution from vessels. The United States, which contested Russian and Canadian claims that these straits constituted internal waters rather than international ones, could point to the treaty's permission of freedom of navigation on the high seas (US Department of State 1992; Oliver 2021). Finally, coastal states could make claims for outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 miles. Although the United States has not ratified UNCLOS, it recognises it as customary international law (US Department of State 1992). Broader geopolitical interests also spoke in favour of reinforcing the cooperation narrative on the Arctic. The Obama administration, which had to grapple with the consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan when it came to power in 2009, wanted to 'reset' relations with Russia during its first term in office. This meant that Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008—which led to its recognition of the secessionist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states—would not stand in the way of détente between the two sides.

While the Ilulissat Declaration temporarily curbed the emergence of a conflict narrative in the Arctic, it led to internal divisions within the Arctic Council. The other three Arctic states—Iceland, Finland and Sweden, as well as Arctic Indigenous communities—criticised the Arctic Five for excluding them from their deliberations (Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015; interviews with Arctic Council officials 2016). They feared that the establishment of a

distinct Arctic Five venue could undercut the Arctic Council as the primary Arctic institutional framework (Kankaanpää and Young 2012; Exner-Pirot and Murray 2017). These concerns were, however, partly allayed when the authority of the Arctic Council was reasserted through the conclusion of two internationally binding intergovernmental agreements on Search and Rescue (SAR) in 2011 and on Marine Oil Spill Preparedness and Response in 2013, which was followed by a third one on scientific cooperation in 2017. The admission in 2013 of six Asian countries as observers in the Arctic Council, including China, Japan and India also reconfirmed its international legitimacy (Ingimundarson 2014; Steinberg and Dodds 2015).

A NARRATIVE LAG: CLINGING TO A COOPERATION FRAMEWORK AMID GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS

Arctic exceptionalism was severely tested by the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. The imposition of Western economic sanctions against Russia, which also targeted oil and gas interests in the Arctic, resulted in retaliatory measures, including a refusal to approve the European Commission's application for observer status in the Arctic Council (Interviews with Arctic Council officials 2016). The worsening relations between the West and Russia raised questions about further spill-over effects in the Arctic. After a prolonged absence from the region, NATO began to refocus military attention there (Foggo and Fritz 2018). Moreover, the ambiguous Western description of Russia as 'neither friend nor foe' (Schmitt [1932] 2007), stemming from the 2000s, lost traction. Russia became increasingly portrayed as a 'revisionist' power bent on violating, in Western jargon, the post-Cold War 'rules-based' order (Rahbek-Clemmensen 2017). The argument was made that the bolstering of Russian maritime power—in addition to the refurbishing of former Soviet bases in the Arctic Circle—could pose risks to Western security interests (Foggo and Fritz 2018). It led to the resuscitation and reframing of a Cold War discourse on 'deterrence', 'collective defence' and the 'GIUK gap' (Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom gap) directed at Russia in the North Atlantic and the Arctic. The West also responded to Russian aggression by suspending military cooperation between NATO and Russia. It was followed by Russia's withdrawal from the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable, which had been established in 2010 to promote collaboration among militaries in the Arctic. Despite increased tensions, Russia continued to support UNCLOS and participate in the Arctic Council (Staun 2017). There was no breakdown in communications between Western states and Russia in the fields of civil security, maritime safety and search and rescue in the Arctic. Yet bilateral relations became marked by a deepening sense of distrust.

What further unsettled the exceptionalist Arctic narrative was the US decision to shift away from the War on Terror and reorient towards a new paradigm of Great Power rivalry framed as 'strategic competition' between states (US Department of Defence 2018). The projection of a new existential threat required the construction of a future to justify a Cold War-style military deterrence. In contrast to George W. Bush's strategy of a time-bound non-intervention in the Arctic, the first Trump administration exercised 'temporal sovereignty' by defining the region in terms of potential conflict (Davis 2008; Ricœur 1988: 246). As outlined in its National Defence Strategy, it identified every global domain—air, land, sea, space and cyberspace, including the Arctic—as geopolitically contested (US Department of Defence 2018: 3). And in a Cold War throwback, the United States began to take active measures to counter Russian submarine capabilities to exploit strategic routes from the Arctic into the North Atlantic (Foggo and Fritz 2018).

China's presence in the Arctic was added to this antagonistic picture because of its interest in investing in natural resource extraction and commercial and infrastructure initiatives abroad—notably, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its offshoot, the Polar Silk Road—which were seen as instruments for projecting political and economic power globally. The US Arctic policy was, at that time, less about the existing Arctic than its future place in a rivalry between the United States and China. Thus, it situated China—a non-Arctic state with marginal military presence in the region and with only an observer status in the Arctic Council—under the same framework as Russia, which was by far the largest Arctic state, with one-fifth of its landmass being north of the Arctic Circle (Pay and Calvo 2020). This anti-China dimension was highlighted by US President Trump's surprising—and unsuccessful—neo-colonial offer to buy Greenland in 2019 (Sorenen 2019). It was partly motivated by rivalry with China, whose investments in Greenland's mining sector was seen as an unsettling development in a territory where the United States maintained a long-standing military presence. The United States also reaffirmed publicly its rejection of Russian and Canadian sovereignty claims over the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage (Oliver 2021). Yet, despite its harsh geopolitical rhetoric—coupled with climate change denial—the Trump administration did not take any concrete steps to subvert the two pillars of the Arctic order established by the Arctic Eight: UNCLOS and the Arctic Council. When the Biden administration assumed power in 2021, it toned down the criticism of Russia and China in the Arctic, while sticking to the national security metanarrative of 'strategic competition'. To be sure, it maintained the sanctions regime against Russia and refused to

accept Russia's proposal to resume a military dialogue among the Arctic states. Nonetheless, reflecting a 'narrative lag', it persisted in the ritual reaffirmation of a US commitment to the status quo in the Arctic (Associated Press 2021).

NARRATIVE RUPTURES: FROM THE UKRAINE WAR TO THE TRUMPIAN REASCENDANCY

While the exceptionalist emplotment had been deeply fractured in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the case for preserving it discursively had not changed: a confrontation between Russia and the West in the Arctic did not serve the strategic, legal or economic interests of either side. However, it proved impossible to stick to this line after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A narrative reconfiguration (Ricœur 1988) was unavoidable, even if the institutional framework underpinning Arctic governance did not collapse. This required not only a revision of policy options but also a shift in political imagination: a reassessment of what kind of space the Arctic was, and what kinds of futures were possible or foreclosed. The seven Western Arctic states immediately 'paused' their participation in the Arctic Council to protest Russia's invasion but hedged their action by describing the forum as still having 'enduring value' for circumpolar cooperation (US Department of State 2022a). What they feared was that the institutionalisation of an 'Arctic Seven' collaboration at the expense of Russia risked jeopardising the Arctic Council's existence (Koivurova and Shibata 2023; Interfax 2024). That this scenario was plausible was confirmed by Russia's decision to terminate its membership in two Northern subregional organisations that were created in the 1990s: the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. After Russia formally threatened to withdraw from the Arctic Council, the Western states agreed to resume collaboration in its permanent scientific working groups—which engage with environmental and social issues in the Arctic—in a distant format (US Department of State 2022b). Yet no in-person Arctic Council meetings have taken place since the outbreak of the Ukraine War, which underscores how dangerously fragmented the Arctic Eight cooperation has become.

Russia has contemplated political alternatives, as evidenced by its outreach to other states, suggesting that it does not see itself as bound by a single institutional framework in the Arctic. A case in point is Russia's announcement that it intended to develop an Arctic scientific station on the Svalbard (Spitsbergen) Archipelago in cooperation with BRICS partners Brazil, India, China and South Africa (Edvardsen 2023). Yet it is doubtful that Brazil and South Africa, which have no

Arctic research presence and whose polar capacity and policy attention is limited to Antarctica, will be prepared to invest in a costly Svalbard presence (Nilsen 2023). Russia could also try to delegitimise the Arctic Council by forming a full-scale rival regional organisation with friendly states (Interview with a high-ranking Icelandic official 2023). Such a schism among the Arctic states could do irreparable harm not only to Western–Russian relations in the region but also to the interests of its inhabitants. Indigenous groups, who were critical of the 'Arctic Seven' for excluding them from their unofficial meetings after Russia's military action, have pressed for continued Arctic Council collaboration, pointing out that the social, economic, environmental and health needs of their communities have little to do with the Ukraine war, in particular, or geopolitical rivalries, in general (Bloom 2022).

The fragile geopolitical condition in the Arctic can thus be characterised as an interregnum: the order, previously rationalised by a post-Cold War cooperation narrative, is—paraphrasing Gramsci (1971: 276)—dying, with a great variety of morbid symptoms appearing, while a new one cannot be born (Cox 1981). The hegemony of the Arctic states is, indeed, in crisis. This is a stage that Koselleck termed 'saddle time' (G. *Sattelzeit*), a transitional period when past and future become untethered (Koselleck 1972: XV; Koselleck 2004: 255–275). Apart from the dysfunctional state of the Arctic Council, other soft law Arctic bodies created in the 1990s to deal with Russia's integration into Western institutions have ceased to function as originally intended. Compounding the geopolitical disarray was Trump's return to the US presidency in 2025 (Levy and Ulmer 2025). It has not only led to growing estrangement between the United States and Europe over military and trade issues but has also sent mixed signals about US–Russian relations. Besides threatening the sovereignty of Canada, Trump has engaged in expansionist rhetoric about the annexation of Greenland for 'national security' reasons, although usurping its vast mineral wealth is no less important an impetus (Holland 2025; Financial Times 2026). Such rhetoric has also been echoed in techno-dystopian plans by Silicon Valley venture capitalists, such as Peter Thiel, to create AI-powered research stations and experimental 'smart' or 'freedom cities' in Greenland with minimal regulation, raising fears of digital neo-colonialism and environmental exploitation (Schreckinger 2021; Holland 2025).

Trump's challenge to the liberal international order has introduced a whole new dimension into the US-European relationship and Arctic geopolitics. This is clearly on display within the Western alliance. On the one hand, all seven Western Arctic states are now part of NATO—following the recent entry of Finland and Sweden—and nominally sticking together *vis-à-vis* a belligerent Russia; on the

other, the United States has made territorial threats against fellow NATO and Arctic states, Denmark and Canada, and weakened its commitment to the defence of Europe. Western cohesion would also be significantly undermined in case of an American–Russian rapprochement, which in the Arctic could revolve around joint ventures on natural resource exploitation or imperialistic attempts to carve up the region. Indeed, Arctic exceptionalism has recently been radically recast in this way as part of a potential normalisation discourse, involving the United States and Russia (Raspotnik, Chuffart and Devyatkin 2025). In other words, two temporalities seem to be working at cross-purposes here: while the current order has not been dismantled—and Cold War alliances remain formally intact—older geopolitical paradigms, such as those linked with the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century, have re-emerged. Such a scenario can be interpreted in Koselleckian terms as a 'temporal regression': a reoccupation of the future by tropes of the past. The Arctic becomes a space of temporal dislocation, where expectations reinscribe experiences instead of suppressing them.

CONCLUSION

The Arctic exceptionalism narrative operated, in practice, as a form of manufactured temporal sovereignty designed to assert control over the future and redefine the past. The teleological emplotment—covering the whole period from the end of the Cold War to the Ukraine War—papered over implications of counter-narratives that destabilised it: the shift from a focus on institution-building and the environment in the 1990s to that of great-power strains and plans for natural resource utilisation in the 2000s and, later, to militarised geopolitics in the 2010s. The semantic framing also represented a flawed attempt to decouple Arctic developments from a broader narrative: the increasingly contentious Western–Russian relationship rooted in Cold War legacies. These included NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and conflicts over the geopolitical orientation of post-Soviet states; Western wars against Iraq and Serbia over Kosovo; and Russian wars against Ukraine, as well as Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In other words, the peaceful 'horizon' was always contingent and unstable, with conflictual 'experiential structures' in the past and present being able to converge and reassert themselves.

Despite such entangled temporalities, the endurance of the exceptionalist narrative can be largely ascribed to geopolitical expediency and restraint. The Law of the Sea aligned with the political, economic and military interests of the Arctic Five, while, simultaneously, allowing them to articulate a peaceful

commitment to international law. Similarly, by maintaining control of the Arctic Council, the Arctic Eight were able to preserve regional hegemony and act as gatekeepers against non-Arctic states, using sovereign concerns to subvert initiatives aimed at creating an Arctic commons or internationalising the region—like Antarctica—under a regime of demilitarisation, scientific cooperation and suspended sovereignty. Thus, a depoliticised forum focused on environmental issues—lacking executive or enforcement powers and established at a time when there was minimal international interest in the Arctic—was able to attain international legitimacy as the region's main body. This trajectory places Arctic governance alongside ocean regions where cooperation has been organised through sovereignty and sectoral regulation, rather than through the suspension of state authority seen in Antarctica or the absence of region-wide institutions in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. More generally, the Arctic shows how narratives and temporal framings can reorder political expectations, allowing governance arrangements to persist despite unresolved tensions over authority, exclusion and control.

Following the tensions generated by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the US adoption of the doctrine of 'strategic competition', another rationale for retaining a narrative that had become unviable had to do with the interaction between time and place (US Department of Defence 2018; Davis 2008). The remilitarisation of the Arctic by Russia and NATO states not only reflects Cold War continuities and legacies—or a potential return to a reconfigured nineteenth-century order based on spheres of influence. It also highlights imagined economic futures that have been further amplified by Trump's resource-oriented neo-colonial threat against Arctic Indigenous communities in Greenland, which collapses the distinction between past and future. It is these temporal struggles that currently define Arctic geopolitics and governance as well as their ideological underpinnings.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE OCEAN AGENDA IN ACADEMIC AND POLICY DEBATES IN BRAZIL: CONNECTIONS WITH THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

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INTRODUCTION

The geopolitics and governance of the oceans are undergoing significant changes. In the Atlantic Ocean, these transformations are driven by two main trends: (a) the renewed regionalisation of initiatives in the Atlantic Ocean, led by intermediate and regional powers such as Brazil, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa, but also by regional organisations such as the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); (b) an emerging 'pan-Atlantic'

perspective, developed in response to an increasing role of extra-regional powers [13] in Africa, particularly China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. North Atlantic powers have supported the latter approach: the USA with its Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation and Portugal with its Atlantic Centre. Several North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies, such as Canada, the UK, France, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Iceland and Norway have actively participated in both initiatives, thus leading to the establishment of new forums and multilateral agreements involving countries from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Considering that the South Atlantic is an integral part of Brazil's strategic surroundings and a priority in its foreign policy, it is essential to analyse the country's current stance on these two somehow contradictory trends. In addition, understanding Brazil's role in the South Atlantic is relevant for African ocean politics: the South American giant has had long-standing interests in African countries; since the Second World War, it has developed historical connections in the South Atlantic, particularly but not exclusively with Portuguese-speaking countries. The Brazilian Navy's Blue Amazon programme has since 2004 stressed the geographical proximity between the two coasts and the strategic importance of the resources found in this extensive ocean-region. The Blue Amazon has inspired cooperation projects, for instance, with Namibia and Angola in the assessment of strategic minerals in their respective continental shelves. Finally, Brazil's cooperation initiatives within the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) and the Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) also explain why Brazil's stance is relevant for the politics of the ocean in general and the politics of the African ocean in particular.

Against this broader backdrop, this chapter addresses the following research question: how has Brazil positioned itself in response to transformations in South Atlantic Ocean governance, especially in relation to regionalisation and pan-Atlantic trends? The chapter is organised into three sections. The first sets the context by examining the shift in ocean governance from a sovereignty-based legal regime under UNCLOS to a sustainability-oriented framework shaped by the climate emergency. The second analyses the ocean agenda in Brazil's recent foreign policy, focusing on the main features of its official narratives and strategies. Both sections draw on content analysis of official documents and a general review of the literature. The third section adopts a different methodological approach, combining bibliometric analysis with a scoping review of Brazilian academic

[13] The ZOPACAS was established in 1986 via UN General Assembly Resolution 41/11, with 124 votes in favour, eight abstentions (mainly European states) and opposition from the US. A Brazilian-led initiative post-Falklands/Malvinas War, it countered NATO and apartheid-era South Africa's proposed South Atlantic Treaty Organization, SATO (Carvalho and Nunes 2014).

literature on ocean governance in the South Atlantic since Brazil's democratisation in the late 1980s. It maps the current state of scholarly knowledge production in Brazil on the South Atlantic and its relevance for Brazil–Africa connections. We argue that Brazil's position on ocean governance actively shapes the shared vision of the South Atlantic as an ocean-region, given its geopolitical interests, long-standing ties with African countries and diplomatic efforts to connect ocean governance with the climate emergency.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE ATLANTIC AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF OCEAN GOVERNANCE

Since the end of the Cold War, the governance of the oceans has undergone significant changes driven by legal frameworks that were internationally agreed upon. This evolution can be summarised in two phases: the 'Constitution of the Seas regime' (1982–1994) and the 'Sustainable Development Ocean regime' (1992–present). When analysing them, we focus on contexts, legal frameworks and shifts in ocean governance, considering how they progressively connect with sustainability and the current climate emergency.

Significant power asymmetries and political tensions between major powers, rising states and developing countries characterise the transition between the two phases. During the 'Constitution of the Seas regime', ocean governance was dominated by state-centric legalism anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) negotiations. Adopted in 1982 and entering into force in 1994, UNCLOS was the result of three conferences: UNCLOS I (1958), UNCLOS II (1960) and UNCLOS III (1973–1982). It established maritime zones (territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and the high seas), clarified rights and obligations and created institutions such as the International Seabed Authority. However, power relations have significantly influenced UNCLOS provisions, most often favouring the Global North and only sometimes benefiting countries from the South, thus constraining UNCLOS as an agent of justice (Schandorf 2024).

This first phase emphasised sovereignty and economic exploitation by coastal states, focusing on discrete jurisdictional regimes and resource access rather than environmental stewardship (Parthenay and Mesquita 2025). Starting in the early 1990s, global environmental concerns—especially climate change and ecosystem degradation—began reframing ocean governance. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit institutionalised the concept of sustainable development, ushering in policies centred on ecosystem health and the interconnections between oceans,

biodiversity and human well-being. Since the twentieth anniversary of UNCLOS, ocean governance has shifted from territorial claims to safeguarding the 'health of the oceans' and aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, Life Below Water (Parthenay and Mesquita 2025).

Parthenay and Mesquita (2025) identify a significant shift in the discourse of United Nations General Assembly resolutions on ocean governance. While UNCLOS-related resolutions taken between 1984 and 1995 primarily focused on treaty implementation and resource exploitation, the language used after 2000 has increasingly emphasised sustainability, ecosystem preservation, marine pollution mitigation and biodiversity protection. This evolution reflects a broader normative transformation in global ocean governance, culminating in the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG 14 calls for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources, illustrating a growing need to align international maritime policy with environmental sustainability across the ocean-regions.

The First World Ocean Assessment, conducted by the United Nations in 2016, emphasised the urgent need for sustainable management of ocean activities. In response, the UN declared 2021—2030 the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development in 2017. This global initiative aims to mobilise action to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda, with a particular focus on SDG 14 and related targets. It brings together scientists, governments, NGOs and civil society in a collective effort to tackle ocean-related challenges, promote sustainable development and safeguard marine ecosystems. International coordination of the Decade has been entrusted to the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO. The initiative aims to expand scientific knowledge, strengthen infrastructure and foster partnerships to support a healthy and sustainable ocean. Its key expected outcomes include a clean, safe, healthy, resilient, productive and sustainably used ocean—one that is predictable, transparent, well-understood and highly valued (Santos and Beirão 2021).

Such perspectives dialogue with several on-going climate debates within other UN organisations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), since the systemic conception of a planetary climate supposes interdependence between land-use, atmosphere and oceans, and these interactions are driven by energy, water and carbon exchanges. Oceans represent approximately 95% of the Earth's biosphere and contribute to climate regulation thanks to the fact that they absorb roughly 25% of anthropogenic CO2

emissions. In addition, they are a key wildlife habitat for an extremely rich (and largely unknown) biodiversity and also serve as a source of animal protein for humankind (IPCC 2019).

As Santos and Beirão (2021:1) point out, it is noteworthy that discussions about the Ocean Decade consistently refer to 'the ocean' in the singular. This conceptual choice underscores the importance of international cooperation in advancing ocean science and developing innovative technologies that respond to twenty-first-century human needs. Beyond its diplomatic utility, this choice is also relevant from an ecosystemic perspective, acknowledging that there is only one ocean and therefore its many regions are highly interconnected and interdependent. This view is made even more evident when dealing with environmental and climate issues, which are systemic and transboundary, as opposed to the cleavages imposed by state sovereign views of the ocean. Hence, the ocean in the singular generates a tension that is of great relevance for the actual ideational and political construction of the ocean-regions as concept and practice.

This reconceptualisation involves reimagining the ocean as a primary space of agency and power. As Marggraff (2025) demonstrates, actors historically regarded as peripheral and passive have rejected labels centred on terrestrial scarcity in favour of identifying themselves as 'Large Ocean States'. This reconfiguration challenges traditional metrics of influence and highlights how the maritime space actively shapes the emerging architecture of global ocean governance. In the context of the proposed framing periods of ocean governance, Table 4.1 below summarises the core principles, key agenda themes and the legal international frameworks that guided each period.

It goes without saying that diplomatic clashes and North-South tensions defined key moments of the UNCLOS negotiations during both periods. Countries from the South, particularly those in the African group and landlocked developing states, stressed the existing normative disputes between state-centric territoriality and the equitable management of the global commons. Having been excluded from early debates on ocean governance due to colonialism and wars for independence, Africa became quite active by the time of UNCLOS III, pushing, for instance, for relevant debates on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Continental Shelf (CS) (Egede 2023).

Table 4.1: Framing periods of ocean governance. Source: The authors, based on Parthenay and Mesquita (2025) and Schandorf (2024).

Period	Core Principle	Key Themes	Lead Frameworks	Main tensions
1958–1994	Sovereignty & Jurisdiction	Maritime zones, resource rights, navigation	UNCLOS (1982, entered in force 1994)	Capacity Gap: Sovereignty on paper vs. inability of Global South to monitor/exploit EEZs
1992–present	Sustainability & Biodiversity	Ocean health, SDGs, marine biodiversity, climate change	Rio Summit (1992), SDG 14 (2015), BBNJ (2023)	Equity vs. Conservation: Risk of 'ocean grabbing' and contested access to marine genetic resources

As highlighted by Sebuliba (2024), a primary point of contention was the perceived neglect of the Common Heritage Principle (CHP), which many developing nations argued should underpin the governance of areas beyond national jurisdiction to ensure that marine resources would not be monopolised by technologically advanced states. Disagreements also concerned the 'landed ontology' of the convention, which would favour coastal states by linking maritime rights to physical coastlines, thereby marginalising Landlocked States (LLSs) and creating a dynamic form of 'landlockedness' that excludes them from the socio-economic benefits of the ocean. Furthermore, Global South state actors resisted the privatisation of scientific knowledge and Marine Genetic Resources (MGR), contending that a singular, interconnected ocean model should not be used to mask a divided world where access to technology determines who truly governs the sea (Drankier et al. 2012). They were often seconded by non-state actors, particularly the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and international legal experts from the Global North (Worm et al. 2021).

In this regard, the more recent negotiations within the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) treaty (signed in 2023) have also witnessed political clashes of the same sort. During its pre-negotiation round, representatives of developing countries were instrumental in demanding equitable benefit-sharing of Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs). Their arguments reproduced similar ideas about avoiding the privatisation of knowledge. This resistance highlights that international maritime policy remains a site of contested normativity and political conflicts, where the Global South seeks to re-centre equity within the sustainability discourse and global public good debates.

These structural asymmetries have increasingly driven diverse diplomatic initiatives, with South–South cooperation emerging as an important strategy in the pursuit of more equitable forms of ocean governance. Against this backdrop, the next section analyses Brazil's diplomacy on ocean governance since democratisation and the new 1988 constitution.

OCEAN GOVERNANCE IN BRAZIL'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

Since 1988, but especially in the early twenty-first century, Brazil's defence and foreign policies officially expanded the concept of 'strategic surroundings' to include the South Atlantic and the West African coast. This shift was followed by high-level institutional and diplomatic efforts, such as the revitalisation of ZOPACAS in 2007, seeking to maintain the region as a nuclear-free zone and a collective good protected from the influence of extra-regional powers. Domestically, the administrations of presidents Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) played a pivotal role in strengthening the ocean agenda—specifically in the South Atlantic—within Brazil's foreign policy. They not only supported the expansion of the country's strategic surroundings, but also championed the idea of the Brazilian maritime domain, officially called the Blue Amazon. Thus, the ocean is operationalised as a central geopolitical instrument for shaping strategic narratives and consolidating the South Atlantic as Brazil's ocean region of influence.

In 2005, the National Defence Policy (NDP) formally broadened the geographic scope of Brazil's strategic interests beyond South America to include the South Atlantic and coastal African countries. The NDP emphasised the importance of fostering South-South relations through diplomacy, trade, defence partnerships and technical cooperation projects, stressing the role of ZOPACAS in this process (Brazil 2005). This maritime projection was further consolidated in the 2008

National Defence Strategy (NDS), highlighting that the South Atlantic was not only a space to safeguard but also as an opportunity to build strategic alliances, particularly with Portuguese-Speaking African countries with which Brazil has long-standing political, economic and social relations, particularly Angola, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde. The NDS proposed expanding partnerships and military exchanges in the South Atlantic, and reflected a clear alignment between defence planning and foreign policy goals rooted in maritime governance and regional leadership (Brazil 2008).

The Rousseff administration reaffirmed and deepened this strategic shift. The 2012 National Defence White Paper explicitly recognised the South Atlantic and the western coast of Africa as part of Brazil's 'immediate geopolitical surroundings,' integrating oceanic concerns into both defence strategy and foreign policy (Brazil 2012). This orientation towards the African continent was a policy change that also influenced the development of an extensive network of bilateral and multilateral technical cooperation agreements and projects. If Lula had opened many windows of cooperation, Rousseff had the responsibility to fund many of them, and the reality of budget constraints, also associated with the impact of the financial crisis in Brazil, finally imposed cuts in key areas. Despite these constraints, under Rousseff Brazil engaged in defence cooperation with several African nations—including Angola, Namibia, Nigeria and Cape Verde—by training military personnel, transferring naval technology and conducting scientific-military research. These partnerships, often facilitated through CPLP, supported building local capacities to address common maritime threats, thereby ensuring that the governance of the South Atlantic remains primarily in the hands of its local rather than external actors (da Costa 2022).

The administrations of both da Silva and Rousseff confirmed that ocean governance, maritime security and the promotion of cooperation across the South Atlantic were not peripheral, but central to Brazil's regional diplomacy and strategic posture. Both institutionalised the ocean—particularly the South Atlantic—as a core dimension of Brazil's external action, linking it to broader goals of regional stability, autonomy and the country's international relations through South-South cooperation (da Costa 2022).

In the aftermath of Rousseff's controversial impeachment in 2016, the Temer transition government and the Bolsonaro administration disrupted this trajectory. The South Atlantic lost its strategic prominence as both a foreign policy priority and a focal point for other governmental policies. As Brazil's diplomacy decisively shifted its interests towards the United States (particularly

under the Trump administration), partnerships with the Global South were significantly downgraded and ultimately undermined Brazil's influence within its own strategic surroundings, weakening long-standing diplomatic ties and regional cooperation frameworks (Gonçalves de Oliveira 2023: 14).

The Bolsonaro administration was very efficient in undoing existing collaborative initiatives in several policy areas, from environment and climate change to military-civil relations, from education and culture to human rights (Buarque de Hollanda et al 2024; Milani and Duarte 2024). More than neglect, it was a policy of actively undermining incremental constructions in all these agendas (Milani and Duarte 2024). Regarding Africa, for instance, Brazil's diplomatic footprint was scaled back through the closure of embassies in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. This withdrawal led to a decline in both political representation and agency, particularly affecting Brazil's standing among fellow members of the ZOPACAS (Gonçalves de Oliveira 2023: 15).

Going a step further and examining the current Lula administration (2023–present) offers a valuable yet risky (as it is on-going) opportunity to analyse how Brazil stands in the face of the current geopolitical and regime changes in ocean governance, as it increasingly intertwines its foreign policy and climate diplomacy. Global geopolitics is not the same in 2025 as it was at the turn of the twenty-first century: the China-US rivalry has reached unprecedented levels and rising tensions have led governments around the globe to spend more on national defence; wars have continued in the Middle-East and Africa, then expanded to Ukraine and Yemen; with Washington's support, Israel has perpetrated a genocide in Gaza (which has not stopped); the USA, under the Trump administration, has invaded Venezuela to kidnap its controversial president, Nicolas Maduro, and attacked Iran; far-right movements and leaderships have gained increased power in Global North and South countries; Big Tech companies are currently key anti-democratic motors, as their business model fuels and monetises disinformation; anthropogenic climate change, extreme events, biodiversity loss, *inter alia*, have become part and parcel of the polycrisis in which we live (Morin and Kern 1993; Swilling 2019; see also Bizos et al., Chapter 2, Part I).

Such geopolitical tensions have drastically eroded the capacity and the legitimacy of multilateral organisations, which have already faced crises for decades. Under such circumstances, an intermediate power such as Brazil is confronted with major challenges in navigating power politics. From this perspective, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay attempted to renew the concept of Southern Atlanticism, by reactivating ZOPACAS. This was evidenced by

the group's eighth ministerial meeting in 2023 (Cape Verde) and its ninth ministerial meeting, to be hosted by Brazil in 2026. Isbell (2024) argues that such a reinvigorated version of Southern Atlanticism could be an important step, rooted in sub-basin regional cooperation, to strengthen strategic autonomy of South Atlantic countries before engaging in full basin-wide pan-Atlanticism, on the one hand, and collaborating with BRICS+ countries, on the other. Due to the geopolitical tensions mentioned and their impact on the domestic politics of South America and Brazil, the Lula administration cannot (and does not seem to be willing to) step up as a provider of public goods in the South Atlantic in the absence of a clear multilateral shelter.

Given the normative shift of the ocean governance regime towards sustainability, safeguarding of the ecosystem and conservation of the biodiversity, the current administration, relying on ministers such as Marina Silva (a global environmental leader) and Sonia Guajajara (the first ever minister of Indigenous peoples), has, since 2023, established environmental protection and climate action as central focus areas of federal public policies. Brazil has taken a leadership role in linking the defence for sustainable development with respect for the oceans as part of an integrated and planetary ecosystem at key international fora, such as UNFCCC COP 30, held at the heart of the Amazon rainforest in November 2025, and the third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC III), held in Nice, France, in June 2025.

At COP 30, Brazil played the double role of hosting the event and presiding over the negotiations, on the one hand aiming at the highest level of consensus possible, and, on the other, defending its own stakes through its climate diplomacy, despite the domestic cleavages between ministries and constituencies. According to official numbers, COP 30 brought together delegations from 195 countries, with more than 500,000 entries recorded over twelve days across the Blue and the Green Zones. In the Blue Zone, there were 42,582 participants, with a peak attendance of 23,006 people on 11 November. In the Green Zone, there were 294,262 visitors, with a peak attendance of 37,206 people on 21 November[14].

COP 30 represented an opportunity for expanding the presence and role of Amazonian players, such as climate experts, civil society organisations, local governments, Indigenous and traditional communities and the private sector. It was an opportunity for world leaders and negotiators to listen to the voices of the Amazonian territory and to strengthen climate narratives and interests

[14] Our analysis is partly based on our own notes taken during the COP 30. Carlos Milani was an over-flow member of the Brazilian delegation. For more details on participants in Belém, see https://cop30.br/en/news-about-cop30/the-amazon-takes-center-stage-in-the-global-climate-agenda-with-over-500-000-cop30-entries-1

grounded in a very diverse context, both biologically and socially. No less meaningful is the fact that these encounters did not avoid conflicts between world visions and economic priorities, the main conflict pitting agriculture and mining stakes against environmental protection, ambitious climate policies and the rights of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, the old zero-sum game between short-term economic interests and the respect for long-term planetary needs and social rights was, once again, at the table of multilateral negotiations in Belém.

The oceans agenda was also present at COP 30. For instance, the opening thematic session of the Belém Climate Summit focused on 'Climate and Nature: Forests and Oceans'. In Belém, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, reasserted that the protection of forests and oceans is essential to ensuring climate stability, preserving biodiversity and safeguarding the survival of millions of people. The fact that the approach to oceans and climate remains fragmented is significant. As Special Envoy for Oceania Jacinda Ardern stated, there is an urgent need to integrate this 71% of the Earth's surface into the official COP agenda. The ocean is the planet's main carbon sink, and thus plays a key role in environmental stabilisation. During a high-level ministerial meeting at COP 30, Brazil and France, in response, announced the establishment of the Task Force on Oceans, an initiative that builds on the work of the Blue Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) Challenge, calling on UN member-states to set ocean protection targets and to adopt marine solutions in their respective national climate plans[15].

The COP 30 ocean-related outcomes, though modest when compared to the current emergency, are important. The Blue Package includes five lines of action: marine conservation, aquatic food production, ocean renewable energy development, shipping decarbonizing and coastal tourism expansion. The blue economy, an equivalent to green capitalism when it comes to the ocean agenda, promises investments to accelerate regenerative ocean action, with pledges of approximately US $20 billion across the ocean-climate nexus, including the Mangrove Breakthrough[16]. Nationally, Brazil has decided to include ocean-based solutions in its National Climate Plan and updated NDC. In addition, the Climate Plan, which serves as a roadmap for Brazil's climate policy until 2035, foresees the participation of traditional communities in the sustainable management of the ocean.

[15] https://cop30.br/en/news-about-cop30/at-climate-summit-lula-highlights-that-cop30-proposes-a-pact-for-the-life-of-forests-oceans-and-humanity

[16] https://cop30.br/en/news-about-cop30/cop30-evening-summary-november-18

President Lula's speech at UNOC III also serves as a clear expression of how Brazil strategically integrates ocean governance into its broader diplomatic and environmental agenda. The 2025 UNOC marked a significant milestone in advancing the global ocean agenda, with a particular emphasis on accelerating the implementation of SDG 14. Co-hosted by France and Costa Rica, the conference adopted a pragmatic, action-oriented approach, aimed at transforming political commitments into tangible outcomes through broad-based stakeholder engagement and cross-sector collaboration (Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations 2025).

The UNOC III gave Brazil—led by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—a spotlight to reaffirm Brazil's high-level political engagement and its commitment to advancing ocean protection through a series of strategic initiatives. He highlighted Brazil's intention to align national efforts with global sustainability goals, particularly those outlined in the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) (Brazil 2025). Using Lula's speech at the 2025 UN Ocean Conference, we summarise the main themes in Table 4.2, along with Brazil's respective positioning.

Table 4.2: Brazil's official stances in the 2025 UN Ocean Conference. Source: Authors, based on Brazil (2025).

Theme	Brazil's Stance
Ocean-Climate Nexus	Ocean health is inseparable from sustainable development and climate mitigation.
Multilateral Legal Order	Strong endorsement of UNCLOS, ISA, and BBNJ as core frameworks
Resisting Unilateralism	Calls to keep oceans out of spheres of geopolitical competition
Biodiversity and BBNJ	Pledge to ratify the High Seas Treaty and support transparent governance beyond national jurisdictions
National Actions	Commitment to expand marine protected areas, combat plastic pollution, promote sustainable fisheries and encourage ocean education

Brazil presented a range of national actions centred on marine spatial planning, sustainable fisheries, ocean science and education. Notably, the country pledged to expand its marine protected areas from 26 per cent to 30 per cent, in line

with international targets. It also committed to ratifying the High Seas Treaty, reinforcing its support for the conservation of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. On education, Brazil announced that it would integrate ocean literacy into formal curricula through the Blue Curriculum and capacity building for teachers and educators. Furthermore, Brazil has launched initiatives to preserve mangroves and coral reefs, developed a national strategy to combat plastic pollution and enhanced scientific data collection through an Integrated Monitoring System. In addition, the government emphasised its investment in the blue economy, prioritising conservation-driven financing, marine spatial planning, coastal protection and the decarbonisation of port infrastructure and naval fleets (Brazil 2025).

Through President Lula's speech at the 2025 UNOC in Nice, Brazil presents itself as a proactive oceanic nation—committed to multilateral, rule-based governance, the advancement of international agreements and the implementation of ambitious domestic policies to safeguard ocean health in the context of the climate emergency. Ocean governance is framed as a strategic and multidimensional priority, closely linked to climate action, biodiversity protection and sustainable development.

This positioning is further reinforced by Brazil's discursive strategy. Lula's speech underscored UNCLOS as the 'Constitution of the Seas', while simultaneously warning against the dangers of unilateralism and geopolitical rivalry in ocean spaces. The symbolic framing of the South Atlantic as the 'Blue Amazon' reflects Brazil's effort to project normative leadership and assert its identity as both a coastal and an oceanic nation. Through this narrative and its announced policies, Brazil attempts to place the ocean at the heart of its foreign policy and environmental diplomacy.

Taken together, the transformation of ocean governance regimes and the reconfiguration of Atlantic geopolitics provide the broader structural and normative context within which Brazil's contemporary ocean agenda must be understood. From the consolidation of UNCLOS as the 'Constitution of the Seas' to the emergence of a sustainability-oriented regime and the Ocean Decade, the oceans have become a central arena where legal norms, geopolitical competition, environmental concerns, corporate power and development strategies intersect. In the South Atlantic, these dynamics are further shaped by renewed regionalism, the growing presence of extra-regional powers and Brazil's self-positioning as a maritime and diplomatic actor linking South America, Africa and global governance forums.

Against this backdrop, understanding Brazil's role in ocean governance requires not only an analysis of official policies, diplomatic initiatives and presidential discourse, but also a systematic examination of how these issues have been interpreted, framed and debated in Brazil by scholars. Therefore, the following section moves from the geopolitical and normative discussion to a structured scoping review of academic production on the ocean agenda in Brazil since 1988.

THE OCEAN AGENDA IN POST–1988 BRAZIL: MAPPING THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

This section is based on the following methodological steps: (i) a bibliometric analysis to visualise key metrics of the collected works through graphs[17], the objective of which is to briefly provide a macro-level overview of the academic literature related to oceans in social sciences in Brazil; (ii) a qualitative assessment organised around five analytical categories—policy, cooperation and strategy, security and defence, international law and energy—which refers to the main themes and keywords identified in the whole set of scholarly papers. This categorisation allows us to elucidate the diverse approaches to a common theme (the ocean), but also to map the evolution, emphases and blind spots in the field, setting the empirical and conceptual foundation for future research development.

[17] Three research strategies were employed. Firstly, we collected peer-reviewed academic papers in English and Portuguese published between 1988 and 2025 using Publish or Perish software. Secondly, we conducted a bibliometric analysis through R software, aiming to identify patterns and to classify the literature in frameworks. Third, we conducted a scoping review to map the prevailing debates in the literature, highlighting the main analytical approaches and points of criticism. The objective here is to provide a macro-level overview of the literature and highlight some general trends and directions. To conduct the literature search, we used a set of descriptors combined with Boolean operators in both English and Portuguese: ("oceans" OR "ocean decade") AND ("law of the sea" OR "UNCLOS" OR "ZPCSA" OR "maritime security") OR ("blue economy" OR "blue justice" OR "blue amazon") AND "Brazil". This search string was applied to the Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar and SciELO repositories. We proceeded by applying seven screening procedures: (i) removal of duplicates; (ii) removal of articles with missing values; (iii) temporal criterion (works published after 1988); (iv) publication type (only articles, books, book chapters, and conference papers); (v) thematic area (only works in the humanities and social sciences); (vi) geographic criterion (exclusion of articles that do not analyse the Atlantic context); and (vii) quality criterion (manual analysis of each work to reinforce the preceding criteria). The dataset with the R script, images, scoping review report, database and more are available in a dataverse through this link: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FYTXX2

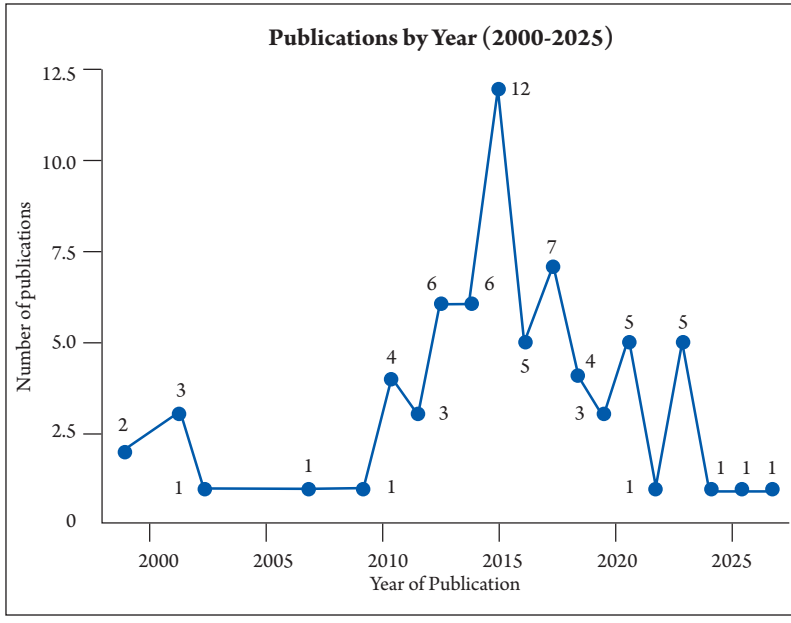

Figure 4.1: Publications by Year (2000-2025). Source: The authors (2025).

The output of scholarly literature regarding ocean-related policies in Brazil went through a noticeable increase between 2010 and 2016, peaking in 2014 with 12 publications (Figure 4.1). During this period alone, 42 of the total publication output (71) were published. The earliest publications date back to 1999, both of which fall under the theme of 'cooperation and strategy' (Carvalho 1999; Ashe, Van Lierop and Cherian 1999). Each analytical framework exhibits distinct periods of expansion and contraction, although the year 2014 shows the highest overall density of publications. Among the frameworks, 'security and defence' account for the largest number of publications, followed by 'cooperation and strategy', 'policy', 'international law' and 'energy' (Figure 4.2).

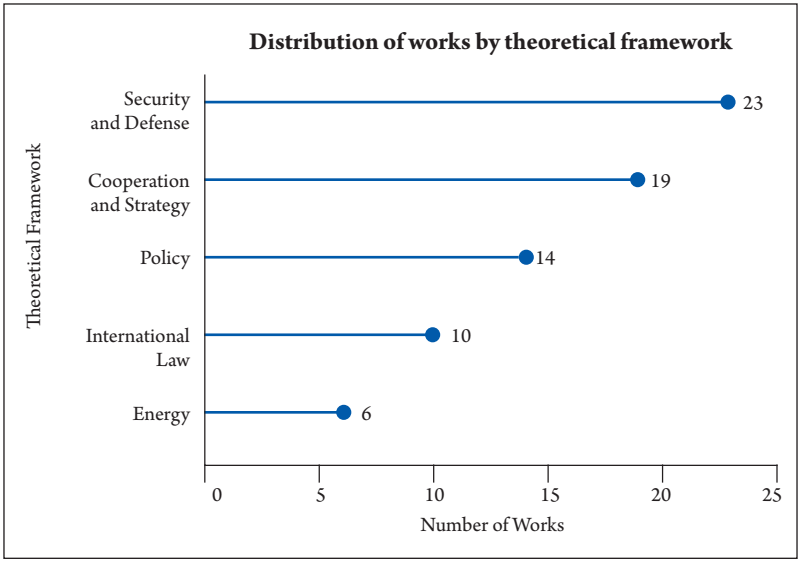

Figure 4.2: Distribution of works by theoretical framework. Source: The authors (2025).

In terms of citation count, the works published in 2014 received the highest number of citations overall (395 citations). This is likely due to 2014 being the year with the greatest number of publications (12) and including two of the ten most-cited studies: Abdenur and Souza Neto (2014b), with 87 citations, and Abdenur and Souza Neto (2014a), with 69 citations (Figure 4.3). The year 2011 ranks second in total citations (189), primarily due to the most-cited article in the dataset: Gerhardinger et al. (2011), which received 146 citations (Figure 4.4).

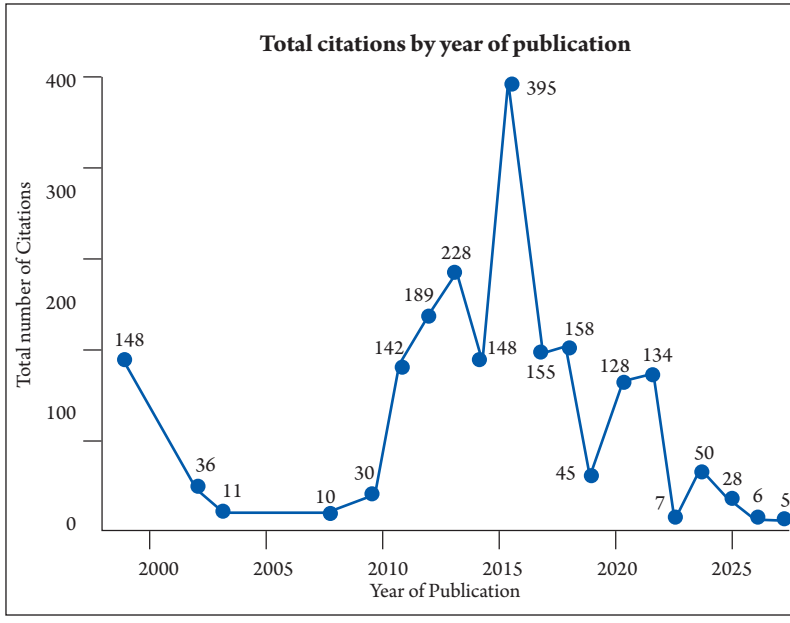

Figure 4.3: Total citations by year of publication. Source: The authors (2025).

As can be seen, apart from Ashe, Van Lierop and Cherian (1999), the top ten most cited works were all published in the second decade of the twenty-first century. At the beginning of 2008, the government launched the second phase of the Brazilian Continental Shelf Survey Plan (LEPLAC, in Portuguese), conducted by the Brazilian Navy and aimed at extending the country's CS beyond 200 nautical miles. Between 2015 and 2019, Brazilian diplomacy succeeded in obtaining approval from the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) for the expansion of its CS over more than 170 000 km^2. Such governmental moves related to the ocean agenda may explain the increasing academic interest reflected in the production and citation of articles.

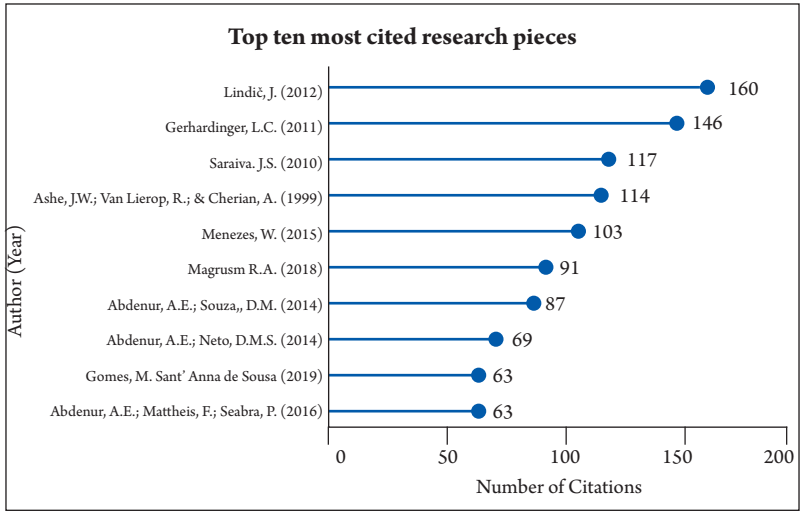

Figure 4.4: Top ten most cited research pieces. Source: The authors (2025).

Further to this bibliometric analysis, we then move to the word-cluster analysis[18]. In the first cluster, the most prominent words are *Atlântico* and *sul* (Atlantic and south), which interact closely with terms such as *Brasil* (Brazil), *África* (Africa), *cooperação* (cooperation), *defesa* (defence), *segurança* (security) and *geopolítica* (geopolitics). This suggests that research pieces focusing on the South Atlantic often address issues of defence and security cooperation between Brazil and the African continent. The second cluster is structured around the word 'Brazil', which connects with terms such as 'South Atlantic', 'energy', 'coast', 'ocean', 'decade', and 'development'. This interaction indicates that publications discussing Brazil in the context of the Ocean Decade tend to focus on the country's potential to develop a clean energy matrix and promote development along its oceanic coast. These pieces of research are primarily aligned with the energy framework. A third major cluster consists of a dense network of interactions among its terms, with no single word occupying a central position in the structure. Words such as 'sea', 'convention', 'nations', 'united', and 'law' characterise this group, which comprises works within the international law framework focused on in-depth analyses of UNCLOS (Figure 4.5).

[18] Methodologically, we used R software to identify six word-clusters based on the titles of the selected publications. These clusters are formed by word co-occurrence patterns, where the size of each node represents the frequency of the word in the titles. Words grouped within the same cluster tend to co-occur more frequently across the 71 works analysed.

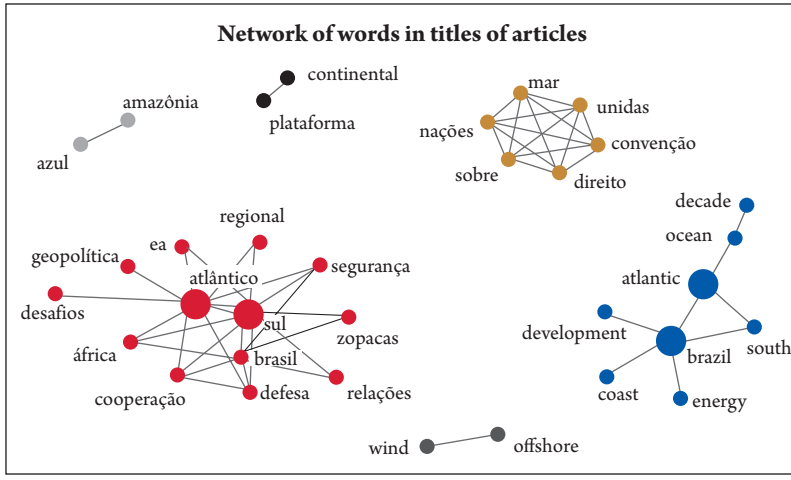

Figure 4.5: Network of words in titles of articles. Source: The authors (2025)

In summary, what are the key findings of the scope review? First, scholarly literature in Brazil follows policy decisions; it does not anticipate them. It was only after the federal government gave priority to the ocean agenda that scholars started publishing more articles about its relevance for Brazil and its economy. As the clusters illustrate, the South Atlantic, the UN ocean negotiations, the tension between cooperation and geopolitics, and issues related to development are at the centre of Brazilian scholarly perspectives.

Second, concerning the five analytical categories (policy, cooperation and strategy, security and defence, international law and energy), what does the scope review reveal? Regarding *policy*, the literature primarily addresses ocean governance, linking international governance structures to domestic arrangements (Gerhardinger et al. 2011; 2019; Barros-Platiau et al. 2015; 2021; Hillebrandt-Andrade et al. 2021). It also focuses on the analysis of specific public policies implemented by the Brazilian state (Reis et al. 2002; Chimeli, Mutter and Ropelewski 2002; Marroni 2014; Polejack 2010; Andrade et al. 2021). A recurring finding within the policy framework is the persistent institutional fragmentation, despite the formal existence of coordination mechanisms such as the Interministerial Commission for Sea Resources (CIRM). While policies such as the National Policy for Sea Resources may represent legal and procedural advances (Marroni 2014), overlapping mandates, sectoral silos and the central (almost exclusive) role of the Navy in agenda-setting still constrain policy implementation. Polejack (2010) and Gerhardinger et al. (2011; 2019)

show that fragmentation persists not due to the absence of policy instruments, but because of entrenched power asymmetries within the public administration, limited financial and scientific capacities and weak incentives for inter-agency cooperation. In practice, initiatives such as Marine Spatial Planning (MSP), Coastal Ecological-Economic Zoning, and Marine Protected Areas are often undermined by competing sectoral interests, uneven enforcement capacity and insufficient integration of scientific knowledge.

These dynamics resonate with critical scholarship on the governance of the blue economy, thus highlighting how sustainability-oriented frameworks can coexist with extractive logics when coordination mechanisms fail to rebalance power relations. The literature also points to a gap between Brazil's international commitments and domestic implementation capacities. Diederichsen et al. (2024) argue that while Brazil rhetorically aligns its policies with global agendas such as the Ocean Decade and SDG 14, initiatives like GOOS-Brazil remain underdeveloped, illustrating the difficulty of translating global governance norms into effective national action.[19]

Concerning 'cooperation and strategy', the academic literature tends to emphasise two closely interconnected themes: the ZOPACAS and Brazil-Africa relations. Despite various advances, a persistent issue across the literature is the relatively limited military and economic capacities of countries within the region. Brazil's engagement in the South Atlantic has thus evolved from symbolic expressions of solidarity into a multidimensional strategy encompassing diplomacy, defence, infrastructure and technical cooperation. The NDP, LEPLAC and PROMAR are examples of this trajectory (Vaz 2011; de Oliveira and Netto 2016)[20]. The Navy has also deepened its connections with African states through training, equipment sharing, joint research addressing challenges like illegal fishing and piracy, and UN peacekeeping operations in Africa (Abdenur and Souza Neto 2014b; Abdenur, Mattheis and Seabra 2016).

Based on ZOPACAS and strengthened ties with African coastal states, Brazil has sought to assert influence, promote a shared regional identity and bolster its aspirations for global leadership. Particularly under presidents Lula (2003–2010) and Rousseff (2011-2016), ZOPACAS was presented as a key dimension of Brazil's South-South cooperation strategy, leveraging multilateralism to counter Western influence (Abdenur, Mattheis and Seabra 2016). This aligned

[19] GOOS-Brazil is a national ocean observation system aimed at collecting, quality control, operational distribution of oceanographic data, and oceanographic and climatological monitoring in the South and tropical Atlantic. For more details, see: http://www.goosbrasil.org/

[20] PROMAR (Promoção da Mentalidade Marítima, in Portuguese) aims to disseminate ocean culture and promote a maritime mindset within Brazilian society.

with broader ambitions, such as securing a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and fostering the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) (Abdenur and Souza Neto 2014c; Saraiva 2010).[21] However, these efforts have been confronted with structural constraints, including the country's limited capacities to invest in South Atlantic economies, weak institutional frameworks and persistent extra-regional competition.

Concerning 'security and defence', the literature on Brazilian defence policy highlights three complementary analytical axes: the institutional consolidation of strategic planning and doctrine (Cepik and Licks Bertol 2016; da Costa 2012); the evolving maritime agenda shaped by resource security and regional leadership ambitions (Mattos, Matos and Kenkel 2017; Duarte 2016; Abdenur and Souza Neto 2014a; Penha, 2012; Wiesebron 2013); and Brazil's emphasis on South-South cooperation to promote stability and autonomy in the South Atlantic (Aguilar 2013; Abdenur and Souza Neto 2014a; Mattos, Matos and Kenkel 2017; Penha 2012). All three underscore how defence policy intertwines with foreign policy, particularly through initiatives aimed at consolidating maritime sovereignty, fostering partnerships with African states and revitalising regional diplomatic mechanisms. Together with the Navy's 2004 blue economy framework, the 2005 NDP and the 2008 National Defence Strategy (NDS), Brazil's maritime security strategy evolved significantly thanks to the pre-salt oil discoveries publicly announced in 2006 (Mattos, Matos and Kenkel 2017; Duarte 2016). As a result, the country shifted from a US-influenced reactive posture to proactively securing maritime sovereignty through UNCLOS claims and naval investments (da Costa 2012).

Internationally, Brazil has strengthened South-South cooperation through the ZOPACAS and CLCS, with initiatives such as the IBSAMAR (India-Brazil-South Africa) naval exercises (Mattos, Matos and Kenkel 2017), as well as Namibia's naval training and Guinea-Bissau's police programmes through the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (Aguilar 2013). These efforts reflect Brazil's dual regional-global strategy, combining military modernisation (for instance, SisGAAz)[22], diplomatic engagement and South-South partnerships to counter Global North influence and promote autonomous governance in the South Atlantic (Beirão 2014; Abdenur and Souza Neto 2014a). Nonetheless, persistent challenges (limited naval capabilities, fragmented defence planning and tensions with extra-regional powers) challenge Brazil's efforts to address transnational

[21] UNASUR, made inactive under the Bolsonaro administration, was an intergovernmental organisation created in 2008 to integrate the twelve countries of South America. Geopolitical reconfiguration in South America, the rise of the far-right in the region and domestic politics in Brazil are key obstacles in its way for reactivation.

[22] SisGAAz (Amazon Blue Management System) is a high-priority strategic programme for the Brazilian Navy.

threats, such as piracy and illicit trafficking. As Cepik and Licks Bertol (2016) argue, the absence of an effective high-level coordination structure within the federal government undermines strategic decision-making and stresses the need for a much stronger institutional framework, continuous investments and greater civilian involvement in defence governance.

Concerning 'international law', the literature regarding Brazil's approach to the Law of the Sea reveals two subsets of studies. The first one focuses on the legal institutions and frameworks established under UNCLOS (Albuquerque and Nascimento 2002; More 2013; Mont'Alverne and Girão 2016; Mattos 2014; Menezes 2015; Barrientos-Parra and da Silva 2017). The second one concentrates on the role of the Brazilian state in shaping its maritime legal and strategic policies, particularly in relation to the development of a state-level policy for the 'Blue Amazon' (Zanin 2010; da Silva 2011, 2013). Despite their different lenses, all these authors share a commonality: they all come from a legal background and have published their papers in Brazilian journals.

This literature also reveals three other aspects that dialogue with Brazil's diplomacy since the first Lula administration in 2003-2006. First, the legal status of marine biodiversity resources under UNCLOS remains contested. Mont'Alverne and Girão (2016) note that developed nations advocated treating these resources as *res communis* (common heritage), while Brazil, India and China successfully argued for coastal state sovereignty within EEZs. The compromise established sovereign rights within EEZs but maintained CHPs for high seas resources (UNCLOS Article 87). Second, Brazil has actively attempted to shape maritime law rather than passively adopting UNCLOS norms (More 2013). Though UNCLOS was signed in 1982, Brazil's 1970 Decree-Law No. 1.098 already expanded its territorial sea to 200 nautical miles. Full alignment with UNCLOS came with 1993's Law No. 8.617, following ratification (Zanin 2010). Third, the Antarctic engagement complements Brazil's South Atlantic strategy. PROANTAR, launched in 1982, expanded significantly with federal investment in developing two research vessels: Ary Rongel in 1994 and Almirante Maximiano in 2008 (da Silva 2011). This trend reflects Brazil's broader ambition to establish itself as a polar stakeholder.

Concerning 'energy', the texts in this category focus on Brazilian initiatives in the energy sector along the Atlantic coast, thus remaining within the scope of this study by analysing the Brazilian state's capacity to diversify its energy matrix through South Atlantic coastal resources. However, all the authors in this group

come from engineering backgrounds.[23] They agree on the relevance of Brazil's coastline for diversifying the country's energy matrix through offshore wind and wave energy (de Assis Tavares et al. 2022; Bastos et al. 2023). While offshore wind has shown growth, wave energy remains technologically immature and costly, though promising for specific locations (Assis, Beluco and de Almeida 2013). Governmental initiatives (for instance, PROINFA)[24] have sought to expand renewables, yet marine energy remains largely experimental, with only pilot projects like the Pecém wave energy installation in Ceará (Bastos et al. 2023). A geospatial analysis identified 319 suitable wave energy sites along the coast, though concentrated in just ten of seventeen coastal states (Bastos et al. 2023).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Coming back to our main research question, how has Brazil positioned itself in relation to transformations in ocean governance in the South Atlantic, particularly in connection with regionalisation and Pan-Atlantic trends? The findings in this chapter provide a comprehensive overview of Brazil's contemporary regional and multilateral initiatives across the South Atlantic, underscoring both emerging trends and longstanding demands. As we discussed in the first section, they add to an understanding of Brazil-Africa relations and the politics of ocean regions from a Brazilian perspective. Analytically, they contribute to a more encompassing vision of the ocean-region as a concept, emphasising its environmental and climate-related dimension, an aspect that has become key in Brazilian foreign policy and strategy towards the South Atlantic in response to the pan-Atlantic trend.

First, we examined the transformation of ocean governance from a sovereignty-based legal regime under UNCLOS to a sustainability-oriented framework shaped by climate change, biodiversity protection and the 2030 agenda. This normative shift occurred within evolving Atlantic geopolitics, marked by renewed South Atlantic regionalism and emerging pan-Atlantic initiatives. In such a context, Brazil cannot reinstate the same diplomatic and strategic efforts from the past under the third Lula administration (between January 2023 and December

[23] We could not find publications related to Brazil's energy capacity published by authors in the field of Human and Social Sciences. Despite our initial criteria, we have opted to include these studies due to their specific focus on a central issue for the Brazilian state: the diversification of the national energy matrix and the pursuit of sustainable economic development.

[24] PROINFA (Programme for Incentives for Alternative Sources of Electrical Energy), established in 2002, seeks to expand the use of renewable sources (wind, small hydroelectric plants, biomass) in the Brazilian electricity matrix.

2026). Due to geopolitical shifts, the need to diversify partnerships through an Asian pivot, the emergence of transnationally organised far-right movements and polarised domestic politics, the Lula administration has reframed its role in the regional arena and the South Atlantic, including South-South relations and the African diplomacy.

As analysed in the second section, the Temer-Bolsonaro governments had implied a retraction from the region, leaving room for other (particularly non-regional) powers to set the scene. Coming back with a vigorous presence in the South Atlantic would imply using resources that Brazil lacks or cannot currently use for this purpose, a situation further complicated by the presence of a far-right president in Washington who promotes closer linkages with anti-democratic leaders in Latin America. Therefore, playing a modest role on both chessboards seems to be Brazil's current and possible diplomatic tactic: regionally, connecting with Colombia and Mexico and their respective progressive and centre-left leaders; globally, rejuvenating IBSA and bilateral relations with India and South Africa, strengthening trade and investment relations with Asian countries (Indonesia, Japan, South Korea) and fostering a strategic alliance with the BRICS+ group in general, and with China in particular.

Second, despite erratic engagement in the last forty years, Brazil is a relevant actor for the understanding of a collective construction of the South Atlantic as an ocean-region. This meandering about the South Atlantic can also be understood through domestic politics: the country's international engagement with the ocean agenda includes multiple strategic actors, such as the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence (the Brazilian Navy in particular), science networks and key federal environmental agencies. However, as clarified in the third section, the literature reviewed does not examine modalities of interaction among these actors in depth; each one plays not only a technical role which requires expertise, but also represents political stakes, institutional interests and constituencies. Therefore, the country's strategic outlooks may diverge depending on which constituencies and agencies have stronger roles in the formulation of international policies. Bureaucratic politics are a relevant dimension of ocean politics in Brazil, deserving further scholarly attention.

Third, the South Atlantic region encompasses a range of interests, avenues for agency and forms of cooperation for Brazil in its South-South relations with African countries. The scoping review reveals that Brazil's South Atlantic strategy operates across five key domains: (1) coastal policy development (despite

governance constraints), (2) bilateral/multilateral cooperation (particularly with Africa), (3) defence and security initiatives, (4) international maritime advocacy (notably continental shelf expansion), and (5) energy diversification (renewables and seabed resources). The review has shown that 'security and defence' and 'cooperation and strategy' dominate the literature, while 'policy and international law' offer more institutional analyses and normative lenses. Across frameworks, we have identified Brazil's growing agency in South Atlantic governance, along with persistent constraints such as institutional fragmentation, limited coordination and uneven capacity. Overall, we argue that the literature portrays the ocean as a multidimensional strategic space where foreign policy, defence, sustainability and development intersect in Brazil's international projection. All these dimensions have key implications for Brazil-Africa relations, as discussed in Part I.

Finally, as far as the ocean agenda is concerned, global and regional dynamics are reflected in the country's foreign and defence policies, but also in its climate diplomacy. Bearing in mind that ocean governance has been institutionalised as a core dimension of Brazil's external action, particularly regarding the South Atlantic, Brazil strategically frames the ocean as a space for multilateral cooperation, environmental leadership and resistance to geopolitical rivalry, positioning itself as an active oceanic actor in the context of the climate emergency. In this context, the South Atlantic has emerged as a clear example of how contemporary international politics and the projection of normative power take shape through the maritime domain, illustrating the analytical relevance of the theoretical perspective that conceptualises the ocean as a region.

The research agenda is now open for new studies, for instance, to understand if and how there is room for African actors, spaces and processes in Brazil's conception of the South Atlantic as an ocean-region. In addition, research must monitor if and how pledges and promises translate into concrete changes, since we know that translating discourse into policy means Brazil's engagement with the ocean agenda may navigate very turbulent waters, both internationally and domestically.

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CHAPTER FIVE

ZONES OF PEACE AND OCEAN REGIONS: THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND INDIAN OCEAN

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INTRODUCTION

The formal foundations of ocean governance have come under growing contestation in recent years owing to a perceived generalised crisis in multilateralism. This erosion has affected not only the reliability of global mechanisms in providing comprehensive coverage and assurances, but also the effectiveness of mainstream regional venues, which have long been regarded as pillars of maritime order. Yet, as Bueger, Mendenhall and Strating (2025: 6) remind us, the composition of such regions involves much more than mere legal frameworks: it encompasses 'specific political and power dynamics, strategic cultures, patterns of practice, embedded norms and values, localised interests, and regional agreements and rules that shape their order'. Against this backdrop, we are challenged to identify alternative ideational aggregators that can sustain and shape the notion of ocean regions beyond existing institutional arrangements.

One such alternative lies in the concept of zones of peace. While these zones have generated varied interpretations within international relations scholarship, their most tangible expression has been found in regional initiatives that 'seek primarily to insulate the areas within them from militarisation and outside interferences that stop short of outright aggression' (Subedi 1996, xli). These projects, however, have often been dismissed as fleeting diplomatic experiments or ineffective rhetorical devices, with many questioning their political utility altogether (Guilhaudis 1981; Leigh-Phippard 1993; Goldblat 1997).

This chapter argues that such dismissals overlook the distinctive contributions of maritime zones of peace. These initiatives, though imperfect and therefore frequently overlooked, represent long-standing multilateral practices that 'attempt to reduce tensions and conflicts in international waters in a sensitive, crisis-ridden area of the world' (Kumar 1984: 245). Examining their constitutive features and trajectories reveals how these practices, repeatedly adopted and subscribed over time, can help reframe notions of ocean regions and anchor them to novel maritime imaginaries.

The chapter proceeds in three stages. First, it clarifies the concept of a zone of peace, distinguishing it from related frameworks and highlighting how a maritime emphasis modifies our understanding of its application in practice. Second, it examines two prominent case studies—the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic—that illustrate how zones of peace were designed and deployed with the aim of shaping regional maritime spaces. This dual analysis of their respective achievements, limitations and innovations provides enough ground to assess their ongoing relevance for the reconceptualisation of ocean regions worldwide. The conclusion then reflects on the contribution of African states to both these experiences and how this helps to understand maritime zones of peace less as utopian or failed disarmament projects and more as zones of peaceful practices whose enduring routines continue to shape the way ocean regions are politically imagined and enacted.

ZONES OF PEACE AND OCEAN REGIONS

The concept of a zone of peace has long attracted scholarly attention for its potential to explain the emergence of distinctive regional dynamics. Much of this literature has pursued two threads. One has linked zones of peace to democratic consolidation and the development of pluralistic security communities, defining them as geographical regions where states sustain peaceful relations for extended periods of time (for example, Kacowicz 1998; Miller 2005). Another has focused on their role in violent conflict, treating them as sanctuary procedures, like safe havens or humanitarian corridors, that enable negative peace and support conflict resolution (for example, Allouche and Jackson 2019; Hancock 2025).

This chapter adopts a different approach, focusing instead on the practical, regionalised manifestations of zones of peace. Across their diverse iterations, two interrelated goals recur: the insulation of regional dynamics from great power interference in a context of Cold War bipolar opposition, and the promotion

of disarmament and confidence-building measures among local actors.[25] These aims were most clearly articulated in the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZP), first advanced within the context of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1964 and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1971. Afterwards, the number of zones of peace quickly expanded. In that same year, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) officially declared a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) through the Kuala Lumpur Declaration. Two years later, the NAM endorsed a similar proposal, this time for the Mediterranean, followed in 1975 by the Nepalese self-declaration over the neutrality of its own territory, a trial-balloon in 1979 from Caribbean states, and by the proposal of a Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) in 1986. Further interest was displayed later on as Central America (1990), South America (2002), the Andean region (2004), and finally, the entire Latin America and the Caribbean (2014) were also proclaimed, in some form or another, zones of peace. Yet the degree of implementation and institutionalisation varied widely. For instance, only the IOZP, ZOPACAS and the South American (UNGA 2002) and Andean (UNGA 2004) initiatives received UNGA support, while the others remained confined to fleeting regional or subregional experiments.

This diversity inadvertently contributed to blurring the concept of a zone of peace, especially when compared with the parallel existence and pursuit of Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZs). Initially conceived as complementary tools to the expanding international non-proliferation regime, NWFZs eventually became more clearly defined by constituting a geographically delimited region established by treaties that prohibited the development, manufacturing, possession, stationing, testing, transportation and control of nuclear weapons within the specified area.[26] Such instruments have often included mechanisms for verification and control to ensure compliance as well as protocols under which nuclear-weapon states undertake legally binding commitments (Goldblat 1997; Leigh-Phippard 1993). However, NWFZs have also been stuck between diverging interpretations: those who perceive them as necessary legal mechanisms in the form of 'political stepping-stones' towards a denuclearised world (Thakur 1998: 3); and those who deemed them 'more symbolically than materially consequential' (Clements and Ghais 1997: 164).

[25] The UNGA's first two Special Sessions on Disarmament in 1978 and 1982 directly linked zones of peace with the overall disarmament drive at the time and incited the creation of additional zones towards that same end (1978: 8, 15; 1982: Annex I, 34).

[26] The first NWFZs targeted the Antarctic (1959), outer space (1967) and the seabed (1971).

Zones of peace, by contrast, remained broader and more aspirational, yet often overlapped with nuclear disarmament purposes. As Misra noted (1977: 24), although the 'two ideas are not really mutually dependent', in practice, zones of peace have always been 'wider in content, and unambiguously included the element of the nuclear-free zone'. This led to the rather common-sense realisation that zones of peace 'imply at least some measure of denuclearization in these regions' (Goldblat 1997: 29). In some cases, such as with ZOPFAN, they even paved the way for subsequent treaty-based arrangements like the Treaty of Rarotonga.[27] Still, Lopez-Reyes (1998: 389) has argued that its main proponents never succeeded in 'converting the idea of zone of peace into theory, in converting the theory into policy, in converting a policy of zone of peace into a practice, and in refining the practice into an institutionalized *[sic]* practice'. In other words, most zones failed to progress beyond rhetorical proclamations and into actual, durable, institutionalised peace. Whether this counts as a failure of ocean regionness altogether, or simply as evidence that regionness can be built through means other than institutionalisation, remains an open question (see Chapter 1 in Part I)—one this chapter addresses by turning to the logic of practice.

In light of this, maritime zones of peace stand out as a distinct spatial sub-category worthy of consideration. Defined as encompassing 'the entire ocean space, from the subsoil of the seabed to the surface of the high seas' (Lopez-Reyes 1998: 401), they purposely extend the overall demilitarisation aims to vast maritime domains. Subedi (1996: 31-32) identifies eight key features usually found at their core: the prohibition of foreign military presence and bases; the exclusion of nuclear weapons and the upholding of any existing regional NWFZ rules; a ban on the use of warships and military aircraft for any threat or use of force against other states; the banning of nuclear testing; the ensuring of freedom of navigation and overflight of the high seas; the renouncing of aggression and the commitment to peaceful settlement of disputes; the respect for sovereignty and non-interference; and the reaffirming of the right of self-defence under the UN Charter.

This extensive and ambitious set of provisions has drawn several critiques over time. First, that maritime zones of peace lack consensual procedures for implementation, verification or follow-up. Second, that their broad geographical scope complicates delimitation and raises tensions with the principle of freedom of the seas. And third, that the obligations of neither zonal nor external states

[27] The Treaty of Rarotonga entered into force on 11 December 1986 and created the South Pacific Nuclear-Free-Zone, only the second NWFZ after the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco in Latin America.

have been consistently articulated (Guilhaudis 1981; Leigh-Phippard 1993; Goldblat 1997).

Yet their overarching aim has remained unabated: to transform vast ocean spaces into demilitarised, denuclearised and neutralised regions (Subedi 1996: 32). More strikingly, the durability of these initiatives—sustained across decades of declarations, reports and diplomatic meetings—suggests that their value lies not in their legal enforceability, but in their underlying practice. Unlike land-based or subregional zones, maritime zones of peace inherently scale up from specific state practices to broader ocean-wide imaginaries. They invite littoral states to conceive of themselves not merely as conduits or playgrounds for external influence, but also as custodians of a shared maritime space, whose security and governance should not be subordinated to outside powers. To put it differently, they create spaces of routine engagement, where states articulate common concerns, reaffirm restraint and generate shared meanings of maritime order. Over time, such repeated acts of diplomacy help constitute patterns of governance and identity. This chapter therefore contends that maritime zones of peace are not simply unrealised projects of demilitarisation; instead, they can turn into evolving sites where the practice of peace can become constitutive of regional interactions. The following sections examine two examples in closer detail to demonstrate such claims.

The Indian Ocean

The Cold War globalised the Indian Ocean as a theatre of strategic competition. For the US, the establishment of facilities on Diego Garcia—transformed in the 1970s into a major military hub after the forced removal of the local Chagossian population—was central to maintaining control of maritime routes and energy flows. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, pursued access arrangements in South Yemen and along the Horn of Africa, extending its naval reach into the region. The arrival of superpower fleets thus led to the realisation that 'while the imperial order was largely ousted from the land, it remained relatively intact at sea' (Buzan 1981: 194) and could undermine regional sovereignty at precisely the moment when local actors were asserting their place in international society (Bashfield 2025).

These developments prompted an effort by non-aligned states to reclaim agency of their own in the Indian Ocean, which culminated in 1971, when Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike brought to the United Nations (UN) the idea of declaring the Indian Ocean a zone of peace. Building on this

proposal, the UNGA adopted Resolution 2832 (XXVI), proclaiming the ocean as such and urging great powers to refrain from further expanding their military presence in its waters (UNGA 1971).

The IOZP rested on a set of principles that were both straightforward and ambitious. It called for the removal of foreign bases, nuclear weapons and large-scale power projection capabilities. It emphasised that the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean should have primacy in managing their own peace and security, thereby affirming a principle of regional security ownership. It also sought to insulate the ocean from Cold War entanglements, offering a collective vision rooted in the ideals defended by the NAM. Accordingly, the IOZP vied to establish a buffer area that would de-escalate geopolitical tensions, meaning it was framed less as a blanket pacification of the zonal states themselves than as a selective demilitarisation effort directed at the superpowers (Lopez-Reyes 1998: 387; Misra 1977). The final touches came with the creation in 1972 of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean via UNGA Resolution 2992(XXVII), which institutionalised a regular procedure of consultations on the state of implementation of the IOZP, thus ensuring that it would nominally remain on the agenda for years to come.

For countries in the region, the advantages of promoting this initiative were clear. For India, the IOZP provided a way of reconciling its strategic interests with its non-aligned identity. Endorsing the initiative enabled New Delhi to assert its autonomy, resist external encroachment and project itself as a leader in managing the surrounding waters (Joshi 2019). Meanwhile, smaller states such as Mauritius and Sri Lanka saw in the project a protective mechanism against superpower encroachment and a chance to amplify their voices in world politics, much as East African states saw it as an opportunity to guarantee stable trade flows amidst fragile post-independence economies and avoid major disruption of relations among neighbouring states (Copson 1977).

However, despite its normative resonance during the Cold War, the IOZP soon ran into obstacles that prevented it from evolving into an effective governance regime. For one, the great powers themselves rejected the initiative outright. Washington insisted that its naval presence was essential for safeguarding freedom of navigation, while Moscow claimed the right to maintain its own access and deployments. Regional consensus was also lacking. The diversity of interests abovementioned made it difficult to sustain a unified position in favour of demilitarisation, even as they kept pushing for the organisation of an overarching conference to settle the remaining operational details. Lastly,

the IOZP's institutional foundations were thin. General Assembly resolutions were and remain non-binding under international law, while the absence of enforcement provisions meant that the declaration remained largely aspirational. By the mid-1980s, geopolitical events in the region and in the world quickly overtook the momentum of the initiative (Kumar 1984; Buzan 1981) and the IOZP lost visibility as an active diplomatic endeavour.

However, its significance lies less in its institutional outcomes than in how it contributed to the construction of the Indian Ocean as a political region. Four innovations in that regard can be highlighted. First, the IOZP fostered an evident sense of regional identity formation. By linking the Indian Ocean to the non-alignment agenda, the initiative showcased how postcolonial states could act as norm entrepreneurs rather than passive objects of superpower politics. This was an assertion of political imagination as much as of policy: the littoral states declared that they, not outsiders, should be the shared custodians of their maritime environment. The common ground was evident: as Copson (1977: 340) noted, at this point, African states had essentially 'subscribed to the view that the interests of all—and particularly their mutual interest in development—are best served by an absence of conflict'. To be clear, the extent of the ocean was never defined; even the Ad Hoc Committee ended up stating that 'accurate definitions' of this nature were not necessary 'at the initial stages' (Misra 1977: 20). But by framing the Indian Ocean as a distinct security space, the IOZP helped shift the discourse toward a collective understanding of shared vulnerabilities and responsibilities.

Second, the IOZP was one of the very first international initiatives to call for the demilitarisation of an entire maritime space, comparable in scope and ambition only to NWFZs, which were also beginning to emerge around this same period. But at a time in which negotiations for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) had yet to begin in earnest, it also brought to the centre stage of the debate the then-controversial principle of the use of the high seas for peaceful purposes (Subedi 1996: 7). Even if UNCLOS resulted in a trade-off by which 'coastal states accepted a relatively unconstrained right of navigation in return for the acceptance by the maritime powers of extended coastal state control over resources' (Buzan 1981: 194), the IOZP still managed to expand the conversation on how oceans could be governed, offering a template for reimagining strategic waters not as extensions of great power rivalry but as innate cooperative spaces.

Third, not only did the IOZP seek to promote the Indian Ocean as an overall demilitarised space, but it also pursued such transformation under a UNGA resolution rather than through a multilateral treaty. This option, while not the

most consequential, did nonetheless ensure constant visibility. Until 2025, a total of forty resolutions and forty reports were regularly submitted and approved by the international community.[28] This comprises evidence of an established practice that, even if it had few practical consequences, has provided a modicum of legitimacy to this initiative. The Ad Hoc Committee membership also provides a good barometer of who supports the need to continue with such regionally tailored discussions: it began with the participation of fifteen member states and even though the US, France and the UK withdrew from participating after the end of the Cold War, it was subsequently enlarged until it reached its present 43 members—fifteen of which are African states.[29]

Fourth, the IOZP helped lay the foundation for subsequent forms of regionalism. Although its security objectives were never fully realised, the aspiration for Indian Ocean solidarity carried forward into later initiatives. The creation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 1997 reflected a continuation of the IOZP's underlying premise that the surrounding ocean could be treated as a coherent region.[30] Although IORA emphasises economic and functional cooperation rather than demilitarisation, its existence owes much to the earlier discursive work of constructing the Indian Ocean as a space requiring collective management. Even the broader and more recent discussion concerning an Indo-Pacific framework, though still dominated by great power competition, continues to grapple with the same tensions between external interests and regional self-definition that fuelled the IOZP decades earlier.

The IOZP thus illustrates the ability to articulate powerful normative visions, but also the difficulty of translating them into durable outcomes under conditions of structural asymmetry. On the one hand, the initiative faltered as a practical project for demilitarisation. Three years after Resolution 2832 (XXVI), for instance, India conducted its first underground nuclear test explosion, becoming the first state in the region to do so. The fact that Diego Garcia remained unresolved throughout this period also attested to the inability to remove external footholds. On the other hand, the IOZP succeeded in embedding the Indian Ocean within global diplomatic imagination as a distinct region whose future should not be left to external powers alone. Littoral states may have remained divided by geography, political alignments and security partnerships, and the ocean may

[28] Reports were submitted annually between 1972 and 1997, after which they began to be submitted every two years. Resolutions were also submitted annually until 1992 and after 1999 they began to be submitted every two years.

[29] South Africa remains an observer since 1995 but has supported the IOZP by regularly submitting draft resolutions to the UNGA on behalf of the NAM group.

[30] For instance, the Jakarta Concord, signed during the IORA Leaders Summit that took place in Indonesia, March 2-5, 2017, explicitly recalled the IOZP experience (IORA 2017).

have continued to attract intense interest from external powers, yet the regional aspiration—first articulated through this maritime zone—continues to inform debates about what is both possible and desirable. The IOZP therefore endures as a reminder of how ideas and practices of peace can serve not only as diplomatic tools, but also as building blocks in the construction of ocean regions.

The South Atlantic

Unlike the Indian Ocean, the South Atlantic occupied a more ambiguous position during the Cold War. It was not a central stage for superpower confrontation, yet it gradually became entangled in the broader strategic rationale of bipolarity. US and Soviet naval deployments and the military use of Ascension Island and the Falkland/Malvinas Islands by NATO members heightened anxieties about the prospect of external militarisation, as the 1982 Argentine-British conflict illustrated. For states on both the African and South American littorals, this pattern evoked a familiar colonial cartography—one in which their maritime space was treated as an extension of the North Atlantic and remained closed to their own autonomous agency. The international campaign against apartheid South Africa and the spectre of nuclearisation in Pretoria further sharpened the sense that maritime peace and territorial emancipation were inseparable (Hurrell 1983).

Taken together, the abovementioned dynamics created the political momentum to reconceptualise the South Atlantic as a site for intra-regional cooperation rather than for Northern projection alone. Accordingly, in 1986, Brazil introduced the idea of ZOPACAS to the UNGA. The proposal was symbolically potent and received overwhelming support from African and South American littoral and hinterland states, but encountered opposition from countries like the US, the United Kingdom and France. Regardless, the resulting Resolution 41/11 formally proclaimed the South Atlantic a space dedicated to peace, cooperation and denuclearisation (UNGA 1986).

Overall, ZOPACAS was founded upon two interconnected propositions. The first was demilitarisation and denuclearisation, explicitly aimed at preventing the introduction or testing of nuclear weapons, at opposing foreign military bases and power projection in the region, but also at concluding the decolonisation process (Abdenur, Mattheis and Seabra 2016). This goal directly targeted South Africa, which still maintained its control over then-Southwest Africa. The second was cooperative development, encompassing joint economic, scientific and environmental initiatives designed to strengthen the autonomy and interdependence of southern Atlantic states.

The initiative's driving coalition reflected complementary, though uneven, interests. Brazil viewed ZOPACAS as a means to consolidate its maritime reach towards Africa and enhance its standing as a responsible security provider. Nigeria and Angola, both navigating Cold War pressures, saw it as a diplomatic platform for the anti-apartheid struggle. Smaller African and South American states joined to strengthen their collective bargaining capacity within the UN system (Jardim 1991). This diverse coalition produced a vision of the South Atlantic as both a zone of restraint—free from external nuclear and military impositions—and a zone of connection, binding two continents historically divided.

Despite early enthusiasm, ZOPACAS faced significant limitations. Great power resistance remained constant. NATO members, for one, argued that demilitarisation would constrain freedom of navigation and legitimate operations related to the Falkland/Malvinas Islands and Ascension Island. Indeed, the realisation that 'projects of this magnitude that do not have support from the North American country have reduced chances of survival and extremely limited reach' quickly settled in (Miyamoto 1987). Institutional fragility also persisted as the zone never acquired a secretariat, budget or decision-making authority of its own (Abdenur, Mattheis and Seabra 2016: 1124-1125). Divergent national priorities further undermined cohesion. Brazil and Argentina focused on nuclear non-proliferation and prestige diplomacy, whereas many African states viewed ZOPACAS primarily as a tool of anti-apartheid policy. The end of the Cold War, the demise of apartheid and the independence of Namibia removed much of the Zone's immediate political urgency, and subsequent regional architectures such as IBSA (India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum) and the Africa-South America (ASA) summits took up the bulk of the cooperative agenda under different banners.

Yet, the enduring importance of ZOPACAS lies not in what it failed to build, but in what it introduced to ocean practices. Four innovations can be identified in this context, each revealing how ZOPACAS contributed to the conceptualisation of the South Atlantic as a distinct ocean region rather than as a peripheral extension of the North.

First, ZOPACAS was the first multilateral framework to provide a transoceanic regional identity and define the South Atlantic as a coherent geopolitical and normative space (Mattheis and Seabra 2022). Before 1986, the term 'Atlantic' was almost exclusively synonymous with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Western security concerns. By naming and legitimating the 'South Atlantic' as an autonomous region, ZOPACAS established a counter-geography that reconnected Africa and South America through shared histories of slavery and colonialism, inasmuch as it did through identifying new opportunities for

cooperation. In that sense, it was not only a diplomatic initiative but a cartographic act that translated into a reimagination of global space, displacing the North as the centre of Atlantic meaning.

Second, ZOPACAS pioneered a multidimensional notion of maritime peace that explicitly fused security and development. Unlike the IOZP, which primarily centred on demilitarisation, ZOPACAS advanced the argument that sustainable peace at sea also required economic cooperation, scientific exchange and environmental stewardship (Gonçalves et al. 2025). This pushed the regional discussion beyond hard military issues toward more collaborative outcomes focused on capacity-building provision. For all intents and purposes, this multidimensional approach anticipated later debates around such concepts as human security, the blue economy and ocean sustainability.

Third, ZOPACAS sought to operationalise a transoceanic non-proliferation framework that bridged Latin American and African nuclear regimes. By attempting to formally connect the Treaty of Tlatelolco in Latin America and the then-Declaration on the Denuclearisation of Africa led by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), it aimed to constitute the South Atlantic as a continuous maritime zone of nuclear restraint. This resulted in a parallel UNGA Resolution 49/84 in 1994 that 'solemnly' endorsed the goal of turning the region into an actual NWFZ (UNGA 1994). Even if it remained a declaratory exercise, it reinforced the confidence-building path already in place between Brazil and Argentina, each with nuclear programmes of their own, corroborated the dismantling of South Africa's nuclear programme a few years prior and, ultimately, foreshadowed the signing of the Pelindaba Treaty.[31] It thereby demonstrated how oceanic spaces could embody cross-continental disarmament practices from below, reinforcing the global non-proliferation regime through regional agency.

Fourth, much like the IOZP, ZOPACAS has benefited from UN formal procedures to ensure a measure of visibility before the world at large. Between 1986 and 2025, twenty UN Secretary-General reports and twenty-three UNGA resolutions reaffirmed its principles. However, their increasing irregularity and loss of appeal have also stood out.[32] To compensate, ministerial meetings have taken place in Rio de Janeiro (1988), Abuja (1990), Brasilia (1994), Somerset

[31] In line with the end of the apartheid regime, South Africa began dismantling its nuclear stockpile in 1989 and two years later, Brazil and Argentina consolidated their bilateral rapprochement initiated in 1986 by creating the Brazilian–Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC). The Treaty of Pelindaba, establishing a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone on the African continent, was signed in 1996 and came into effect on 15 July 2009.

[32] The last resolution was submitted to the UNGA in 2021, whereas the last report prepared by the UNSG was submitted in 2015.

(1996), Buenos Aires (1998), Luanda (2007), Montevideo (2013) and Mindelo (2023), vying to keep the original agenda alive amidst fleeting political interest from key countries (Abdenur, Mattheis and Seabra 2016). Though lacking permanent support structures, these gatherings have at the very least established a pattern of dialogue and symbolic reaffirmation. They even inspired later platforms such as the ASA Summits, confirming ZOPACAS as an enduring diplomatic architecture for the South Atlantic and a blueprint for future South-South maritime cooperation.[33]

Through these cumulative features, ZOPACAS was able to articulate a vision of the South Atlantic that was simultaneously geopolitical and developmental. It demonstrated that the sea could be a bridge rather than a buffer, a platform for reknitting postcolonial connections across continents, even if limitations such as lack of enforcement, uneven participation and eventual political fatigue, mirrored those of many Global South initiatives during the late Cold War. More recently, renewed interest in Atlantic cooperation frameworks by such countries as the US, Portugal or Morocco has further underscored the relevance of ZOPACAS, particularly for Brazil, as a reference point to articulate a distinct South Atlantic vision, less as a demilitarisation scheme than as a flexible diplomatic framework for managing renewed external interest within this area. In sum, the ZOPACAS represents an experiment in reversing the flow of Atlanticism. Its contribution to the idea of an ocean region lies not merely in demilitarisation but in its attempt to transform an oceanic void—long defined by absence, dependence and exploitation—into a South Atlantic community, grounded in shared norms of peace, cooperation and development.

CONCLUSION

The historical trajectories of the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic show that the significance of maritime zones of peace lies less in their success as policy instruments and more in their persistence as practices of collective engagement and cooperation. They endured not because they achieved full demilitarisation, but because they instituted enduring habits of dialogue, mutual reassurance and regional imagination. Hence, zones of peace should be understood, first and foremost, as zones of peaceful practices, that is, arenas where the repetition of diplomatic routines, symbolic reaffirmations and cooperative gestures collectively produce regional order. Their value does not depend on quantifiable 'effectiveness' but on their ability to cultivate shared norms, stabilise expectations and maintain alternative visions of ocean governance.

[33] For instance, the Malabo Declaration, one of the outputs of the III Africa-South America summits that took place in Equatorial-Guinea from 20-22 February 2013, expressed its appreciation for the contribution of ZOPACAS in bringing both sides together (ASA Summit 2013).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge their share of limitations. As Guilhaudis (1981: 207) once warned, 'the various proposals for zones of peace or NFZs do in fact display an odd kind of naiveté and innocence of political reality' and we 'might even be forgiven for wondering if it is really disarmament that has all along been the real objective'. However, this critique does not negate their ultimate relevance; in fact, it underlines that their contribution lies precisely in the gap between aspiration and reality. In that gap, zones of peace create political laboratories where states learn to articulate and perform regional belonging. By anchoring regional identity in the maritime domain, both the IOZP and ZOPACAS foreshadowed contemporary debates on ocean governance and provided a normative lineage for thinking about the Indian Ocean, the South Atlantic and other seascapes as coherent, self-constituted regions. Still, neither zone ever came close to producing a single, settled regional order. The IOZP fed into IORA and, more recently, into the still-forming Indo-Pacific, whereas ZOPACAS flowed into IBSA and the ASA Summits. This proliferation is arguably what maritime zones of peace end up delivering, since regions built through practice rather than through an institutionalised treaty rarely converge on a single authoritative architecture. Ocean regions may therefore be bound to remain plural and unfinished rather than fully consolidated. Yet, it is precisely this openness to recurrent contestation that keeps the idea of an ocean region alive, including who gets to define it.

This is particularly true when considering Africa's contemporary maritime condition, marked by a persistent tension between insecurity and governance experimentation. Indeed, African maritime spaces today are often narrated through the language of crisis such as piracy in the western Indian Ocean, illicit trafficking in the Gulf of Guinea, offshore resource competition and renewed external naval deployments under the banner of maritime security assistance. But the histories of maritime zones of peace discussed in this chapter point to an alternative African engagement with the sea, one that has long emphasised autonomy and collective stewardship. African states were not merely peripheral participants in these initiatives but central norm entrepreneurs, articulating visions of maritime order that sought to balance security concerns with broader political and developmental objectives.

In this sense, zones of peace encapsulate many of the dilemmas currently facing African maritime governance, including how to manage external involvement without forfeiting agency, how to link security provision to development, and how to frame the ocean as a shared regional space rather than as a fragmented set of national vulnerabilities. Seen from this perspective, maritime zones of

peace offer a rich conceptual foundation for understanding ocean regions. They demonstrate that regions are not only drawn or formalised, but can also be brought into being through repeated acts of cooperation. Recognising zones of peace as zones of peaceful practices allows them to be recovered as evolving sites where the idea of an ocean region continues to take form.

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CHAPTER SIX

SEA-LEVEL RISE, STATEHOOD AND THE FUTURE OF CLIMATE MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is increasingly recognised as the defining issue of our times, with the various elements comprising this change—notably rising sea levels, and ocean warming and acidification—threatening the viability of coastal areas around the world. For many Small Island Developing States (SIDS)[34], rising sea-levels mean the disappearance of their land, and with it, possibly their statehood and sovereignty.

The submergence of land territory has wide-ranging implications for International Law (IL) and International Relations (IR) as the international system as we know it is structured around a terra-centric conception of the state, in which sovereignty—a central norm—is anchored in territory. Statehood is thought to be difficult to acquire but, once gained, assumed to have continuity. This implies manifold contradictions and raises questions about whether states can continue to exist in the absence of land territory and what becomes of their sovereignty, maritime rights and membership of the broader global community. Further, what happens to the populations of such countries when their homelands are uninhabitable?[35]

[34] There are a number of main groupings, including the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. While all SIDS face similar challenges vis-à-vis sea-level rise, it is the Pacific SIDS that are effectively at the forefront in terms of bearing the brunt of the most challenging consequences, as well as being essentially the laboratory for legal innovations in addressing these consequences.

[35] An early version of this research was presented at the Ocean Regions Programme's Colloquium in 2024, and the presentation serves as the framework for this chapter.

These questions expose tensions and critical gaps in international legal frameworks. According to Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, a 'defined' territory is considered a constituent element of statehood, as is a permanent population living on said territory. Moreover, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants maritime jurisdiction and the associated sovereign rights based on the existence of land territory. At the same time, international refugee and migration frameworks do not provide for relocation in circumstances of territory loss (Otto 2024), and as such entire communities may become legally invisible, lacking recognition of their status. This leaves these states navigating a legal vacuum[36] as they seek avenues to address these impending challenges.

This chapter considers these issues by first exploring the implications of sea-level rise for the international legal conception of statehood, including de-territorialisation and emerging legal pathways being pursued by SIDS in this regard. Next, it considers the migratory dimensions of the loss of territory, touching on the risks of statelessness, the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks and the emerging and contested pathways for mobility and resettlement. The chapter highlights the urgent need for international reform to address these challenges to the international system.

While the challenges posed by sea-level rise affect low-lying states globally, this chapter focuses specifically on Pacific SIDS, notably because they are both on the frontline of climate-induced sea-level rise and at the forefront of developing legal and policy innovations to address the dual challenge of statehood continuity and migration in this context. The Pacific thus features in this chapter not as a regional focus per se, but as an analytically instructive ocean region in which these dynamics are already unfolding and being engaged with. This has positioned the region as a site of normative experimentation, where attempts to preserve statehood, sovereignty and collective identity in the absence of land are being advanced explicitly. The approaches examined herein are therefore not treated as region-specific solutions, but early manifestations of responses, the implications of which carry beyond the region to the world at large.

More broadly, the chapter contributes to ongoing efforts to centre oceans within IR and IL scholarship by demonstrating how ocean regions function as sites of constitutional stress for the international system. Sea-level rise exposes the limitations of terra-centric conceptions of sovereignty, territory and political

[36] Statehood is not only closely linked to the existence of a territory in current international law, but the existence of land also justifies a coastal state's right to extend its sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over certain maritime zones under UNCLOS.

membership upon which both disciplines rely, revealing how core legal categories are destabilised when the physical relationship between land and sea becomes uncertain. In this context, oceans are spaces in which global power asymmetries are rendered visible, particularly between high-emitting, territorially secure states, and low-emitting, low-lying states. Moreover, ocean regions are transregional sites of stress in this context, with similar stress points emerging elsewhere, including the Western Indian Ocean. At the same time, this circumstance challenges prevailing assumptions about mobility by foregrounding forms of displacement that are neither voluntary nor persecution-based. By highlighting these dynamics, the chapter argues that ocean regions compel a rethinking of sovereignty, statehood and mobility that is presently insufficiently addressed within orthodox international legal and political analysis.

STATEHOOD AND THE CHALLENGE OF SEA-LEVEL RISE

Traditional conceptions of statehood

Sea-level rise in ocean regions poses a fundamental challenge to international legal and political assumptions that anchor sovereignty, statehood and maritime entitlement in stable land territory. The Montevideo Convention remains the 'best known formulation of the basic criteria for statehood' (Crawford 2007). Article 1 defines four essential attributes: a permanent population, a clearly defined territory, an independent government and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. These criteria, however, are not universally accepted as definitive requirements for statehood (Grant 1999). Sterio (2011) argues that they are incomplete and require revision. In practice, a state encompasses more than just these defining elements, and is a political, legal, economic, social, cultural and historical construct comprising individuals and communities pursuing a shared destiny (Krasner 1984). Nonetheless, the constituent elements of statehood set out by the Montevideo Convention remain one of the primary framings for what statehood is considered to be.

For our purposes, the criterion of a defined territory is critical. 'Territory' offers many grey areas in law, as there is no commonly accepted international legal definition (Saunders 2021). Broadly speaking, it refers to the physical space over which a state exercises its sovereignty and jurisdiction. This encompasses continental and insular areas, internal waters, generated using straight baselines, archipelagic waters and its territorial sea, as well as the airspace over them. Importantly, there is no rule requiring a minimum size of territory—the Vatican

City comprises only 0.4 square kilometres—nor that territory be contiguous, though fragmentation may complicate effective control (Crawford 2007).

UNCLOS elaborates how maritime entitlements derive from land. A littoral state's territorial sea extends twelve nautical miles (nm) from the coastal baseline (Article 3 UNCLOS); it may also claim an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending up to 200 nm (Article 57 UNCLOS) and potentially also a right to the continental shelf. Beyond these limits lie the high seas, over which no single state has jurisdiction (Germond and Germond-Duret 2016). These maritime zones are thus legally anchored in the existence of natural land territory.

Islands illustrate this connection between land and maritime rights. Article 121 in UNCLOS defines an island as 'a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide'. Such islands generate maritime zones in the same way as continental land. However, rocks which cannot sustain human habitation do not. According to Article 60 UNCLOS, artificial islands, installations and structures do not possess the status of islands and cannot generate maritime claims—rather they are formed in the already existing maritime zones of the state. This was affirmed in the *South China Sea Arbitration* (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China 2016), in which the Arbitral Tribunal held that low-tide elevations—naturally formed areas submerged at high tide—do not constitute territory in the legal sense.[37] Accordingly, artificial islands, even if built on low-tide elevations, could not preserve statehood under Montevideo's 'defined territory' requirement.

The importance of territory goes beyond geography. The Montevideo Convention also stipulates that states should have a permanent population and the ability to govern effectively, both of which have historically depended on the existence of land and control over that land.[38] Territory is also closely linked to sovereignty, denoting the exercise of supreme, absolute and exclusive power (Wrange 1994). Thus, territory functions as the principal sphere of sovereignty, symbolising not only physical space but also the political and legal expression of independence and authority.

[37] South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines v China) Award of 12 July 2016 para 309. Furthermore, in Maritime Delimitation and Territorial Questions between Qatar and Bahrain, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) held that international treaty law is silent on the question of whether low-tide elevations can be considered 'territory', and there is no uniform and widespread state practice in this regard. Therefore, the few existing rules do not justify a general assumption that low-tide elevations are territory in the same sense as islands, Maritime Delimitation and Territorial Questions between Qatar and Bahrain (Qatar v Bahrain) (Merits) [2001] ICJ Rep 40 para 205.

[38] Island of Palmas Case (or Miangas) (United States v Netherlands) (Award) (1928) II RIAA 829, 840; Report of the International Committee of Jurists entrusted by the Council of the League of Nations with the task of giving an advisory opinion upon the legal aspects of the Aaland Islands question, League of Nations Official Journal, Special Supplement 4 (1920) 8–9.

The presumption of continuity and emerging jurisprudence

When land is lost, a state's territorial integrity is ultimately at risk. Yet history shows international law has been flexible in responding to such changes. For example, the Holy See continued to be recognised between 1870 and 1929 despite losing its land to Italy; the Order of St. John endured after being expelled from Malta; and there have been cases of governments in exile when their territories were occupied (International Law Commission (ILC) 2022). In each case, statehood was not questioned. This reflects a strong presumption in favour of continuity once statehood is established as the state remains a fundamental institution of international law, and its continuity underpins international peace and stability (Green 2024a, 2024b). In the context of climate change, statehood must show similar adaptability if law is to remain credible and predictable.

The ILC has considered whether artificial measures could sustain territory for legal purposes, asking whether a 'naturally formed' island might become effectively artificial under Article 121 UNCLOS. The example of Okinotorishima, an atoll heavily reinforced through artificial means by Japan, illustrates the uncertainty (ILC 2021). While reinforcing or constructing features may slow loss of territory, the costs and environmental consequences limit their feasibility as solutions (ILC 2021).

For SIDS, the loss of land results from a global phenomenon for which they bear little responsibility—SIDS tend not to be states responsible for excessive levels of carbon emissions.[39] To deny their statehood because territories become submerged through environmental developments entirely beyond their control—despite retaining other attributes of statehood—would be inequitable. Preserving statehood through legal adaptation is therefore both just and necessary. The ILC, in its project on sea-level rise, confirmed this presumption, noting that:

> "[w]ith regard to small island developing States whose territory could be covered by the sea or become uninhabitable owing to exceptional circumstances outside their will or control, a strong presumption in favour of continuing Statehood should be considered" (ILC 2022).

Similarly, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its 2025 *Advisory Opinion on Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change*, affirmed that loss of one

[39] UNDP Climate Promise, 'Small Island Developing States are on the frontlines of climate change – here's why', 30 April 2025, available at https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/small-island-developing-states-are-frontlines-climate-change-heres-why (last accessed 22 April 2026).

element such as territory does not automatically entail the loss of statehood.[40] Still, orthodox views remain powerful. Oppenheim (1955) famously argues that 'a [s]tate without a territory is not possible'. Accepting statehood without land would mark a profound shift in the traditional, terra-centric foundations of international law. Yet climate change compels precisely this shift: without adaptation, states and their entire populations risk falling into a legal void. In response, SIDS are actively advancing positions in international fora to secure their future, pressing for more formal recognition of continuity in the absence of land territory.

Strategies by SIDS to preserve statehood

Faced with the existential threat of sea-level rise, SIDS, notably those in the Pacific, have explored creative strategies to safeguard their future. The Maldives has pursued large-scale land reclamation, most notably Hulhumalé, an artificial island established in 2004 to relieve overcrowding on Malé and provide land an additional metre above sea-level—Maldives has an average elevation of only 1m above sea level (Otto 2024). Although more resilient than much of the country, such projects remain vulnerable to further sea-level rise and can cause significant negative impacts on the marine environment, including the destruction of habitats like coral reefs, changes in coastal erosion and wave patterns, and impacts on marine food chains and biodiversity. More recently, the Maldives has commissioned a floating city to be built on a flexible grid in a lagoon. While innovative and more environmentally sustainable (Otto 2024), floating cities lack a clear legal status, as international law does not recognise artificial islands or floating structures as territory capable of generating maritime zones according to Articles 60 and 80 UNCLOS; instead, these structures are only entitled to a limited safety zone of 500m (ILC 2021). The *South China Sea Arbitration* reinforced this, as indicated above. The ICJ has similarly noted the absence of uniform practices regarding their status.[41] Accordingly, artificial islands and floating cities cannot provide the legal foundation for continuity of statehood under the Montevideo Convention.

Other strategies focus on acquiring land abroad. The Maldives once suggested purchasing land in India or Sri Lanka as insurance against climate-driven displacement (Ramesh 2008). Kiribati took this further, completing the purchase of 2 210 hectares of land on Fiji's Vanua Levu in 2014. While framed

[40] Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change (Request for Advisory Opinion) ICJ Rep 2025.
[41] Maritime Delimitation and Territorial Questions between Qatar and Bahrain (Qatar v Bahrain) (Merits) [2001] ICJ Rep 40 para 205.

as part of development and food security planning, the acquisition has also been seen as a hedge against future territory loss. Yet, the purchase conferred only private ownership, not sovereignty. Under international law, sovereignty over land remains with the host state unless formally ceded by treaty (Caligiuri 2022; Crawford 2007). This raises difficult questions: could Kiribati claim statehood based on purchased land if its original territory disappears? Would sovereignty need to be transferred before submergence? Could dual nationality preserve the rights of its citizens?

These examples reveal the limits of existing law and the extent of grey areas and question marks that remain. At best, measures to create artificial or floating islands may enhance resilience and provide short-term relocation options, but they do not resolve the deeper legal challenge around the continuity of statehood in the absence of land territory.

THE FUTURE OF CLIMATE MIGRATION

Legal gaps in protecting climate-displaced persons

Despite the growing urgency of sea-level rise, international law provides little clarity on how to protect those displaced by its effects. The existing refugee regime, anchored in the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, defines refugees as people with a 'well-founded fear of persecution'. This does not extend to climate-displaced persons. Campaigners sometimes invoke the term 'climate refugee' to signal urgency, but legal scholars warn that expanding the refugee definition could dilute protections for those fleeing persecution (Otto 2024).

Alternative terms like 'environmentally displaced persons' have been proposed. Abdulla (2020), for example, draws on the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters (PPED) adopted by the ILC to suggest implied rights for those moving due to climate impacts (Abdulla 2020). Yet, these frameworks remain non-binding and do not offer enforceable pathways for cross-border protection.

Human rights law does, though, impose some obligations. The principle of non-refoulement, for example, may prevent states from returning individuals to life-threatening environments (Molnár 2016). Broader human rights instruments such as the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child can also provide safeguards relating to life, dignity and family unity. But these obligations are indirect and do not create a tailored protection regime for climate-displaced persons.

Regional frameworks have taken some modest steps forward. The 2009 *African Union's Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa* (known as the Kampala Convention) explicitly recognises displacement caused by natural disasters, while the non-binding *Cartagena Declaration on Refugees* (Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Central America, Mexico and Panama 1984) broadens the definition of refugees to include those fleeing 'events seriously disturbing public order.' Both frameworks offer potential models for recognising climate-induced displacement, though neither has yet been widely applied to cross-border movements caused by sea-level rise.

Some suggest that populations of disappearing states might be considered stateless under existing conventions. The 1954 and 1961 Statelessness Conventions define a stateless person as one 'not considered a national by any [s]tate under the operation of its law'. However, these instruments were designed for contexts such as gaps in nationality law or state succession, not the wholesale disappearance of territory. Moreover, determinations of statelessness are left to individual states, creating inconsistency and uncertainty. While statelessness provides some rights—identity documents, access to court and protection from discrimination—it does not guarantee resettlement or the preservation of cultural identity (Otto 2024).

To avoid such outcomes, some scholars have advanced the idea of *ex-situ* citizenship in which populations retain their nationality even if the state becomes de-territorialised (Burkett 2011). This would allow them to maintain a legal personality, exercise political rights and preserve cultural identity abroad. Yet *ex-situ* citizenship depends critically on recognition by other states and international organisations. Without such recognition, continuity risks becoming a legal fiction, leaving displaced populations without enforceable rights.

Case law highlights the gap between human need and legal categories, as with the case of the Teitota family from Kiribati, who unsuccessfully sought refugee status in New Zealand. Their claim raised critical questions about the impossibility of return and the inadequacy of current legal categories, but courts remain reluctant to expand refugee protection to include climate displacement (Otto 2024). Similarly, while mass relocation or collective resettlement has been suggested, there is no international legal framework to govern how such movements would be organised or rights safeguarded.

The absence of protection is compounded by the politicisation of migration. Authors warn that narratives of mass 'climate refugees' are being used by some

governments to justify restrictive border climate policies in the Global North, such as increasingly strict border controls and the securitisation of climate migration, rather than to generate solidarity (Sim-Sarka 2025).

Regional and bilateral pathways

Several Pacific Island states are engaging in regional fora to advance their aims, notably the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). At the 52nd PIF Leaders Meeting in November 2024, member states adopted the 2023 *Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise* (PIF 2023a). This declaration explicitly links the concept of statehood continuity with safeguarding the rights and identity of people displaced or affected by sea-level rise. Prior to this, the PIF (2021) had already issued a *Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise*, which underwrites the idea that maritime entitlements and baselines should continue notwithstanding changes in physical geography. In parallel, PIF members endorsed the *Regional Framework on Climate Mobility* in November 2023, which deals with migration, displacement and planned relocation and is aimed at guiding national and regional policies, technical cooperation and funding arrangements to ensure mobility is safe, dignified and responsive to cultural need and social concerns (PIF 2023b).

AOSIS, a regional organisation comprising 39 members, has outlined its position that statehood shall be accepted as continuing even when territory is lost to climate-induced sea-level rise, based on the strong presumption in international law of the continuity of statehood and legal personality, and noted further that:

> "It is our view that once a state is created by a people expressing their right to self-determination through statehood, that [s]tatehood will cease only if another form of expression of the right to self-determination is explicitly sought and exercised by that people. This is the only determinant of whether a state continues"[42] (AOSIS 2024).

Speaking on behalf of the Alliance, Samoa's permanent representative to the United Nations added that '[w]e depend on international law to secure our rights in a constantly changing world'.[43]

[42] Statement by Samoa on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) under Agenda Item 79 – Report of the International Law Commission on the work of its seventy-third and seventy-fourth Sessions Sixth Committee, Delivered by H.E. Mr. Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Pa'olelei Luteru, Permanent Representative of Samoa to the United Nations, Friday, 27 October 2023, available at https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/78/pdfs/statements/ilc/27mtg_aosis_1.pdf.

[43] Statement by Samoa on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) under Agenda Item 79 – Report of the International Law Commission on the work of its seventy-third and seventy-fourth Sessions Sixth

The Pacific Access Category (PAC) provides another example. It is a residency scheme operated by New Zealand that provides citizens of Pacific Island nations—including Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati and Tuvalu—with a structured migration pathway via an annual ballot. Applicants must be eighteen to 45 years of age, secure a full-time job with a scheduled duration of at least twelve months and meet English language requirements, as well as certain health and character standards. Once granted, the visa enables holders to live in New Zealand indefinitely and they may become eligible for citizenship after holding residence for two years. [44]

At a bilateral level, some states have also been seeking mobility pathways that enable mobility with dignity. One such agreement is the *Falepili Union Treaty* between Australia and Tuvalu (2024). Under the Treaty, Australia offers several types of support, including a mobility pathway for 280 Tuvaluans per year, with no age, health or work requirements, but that enables circular migration. Tuvalu, for its part, has agreed not to enter into security or defence agreements without Australia's input. The Treaty has been widely criticised, with some describing it as neo-colonial (Dellerba 2024), while others have raised concerns for Tuvaluan sovereignty (Söderström 2024).

Human dignity, culture and identity in migration

Beyond legal recognition and mobility pathways, the preservation of culture, language and spiritual ties is central to the dignity and continuity of island communities facing displacement as a result of sea-level rise. Identity is not only bound to geography but also embedded in social practices, oral traditions, kinship networks and connections to ancestral land, which will submerge in years to come. As Farbotko and McMichael (2019) argue, climate mobility is often framed in reductive terms of vulnerability and loss, but affected communities themselves prefer to emphasise resilience, cultural continuity and agency in shaping their futures. Ensuring that mobility frameworks integrate these dimensions is essential to avoid a double erasure of both territory and identity.

Preliminary findings from field research conducted by the authors of this chapter[45] underscore how displaced populations see the preservation of language and spiritual practices as of critical importance. These intangible elements are

Committee, Delivered by H.E. Mr. Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Pa'olelei Luteru, Permanent Representative of Samoa to the United Nations, Friday, 27 October 2023, available at https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/78/pdfs/statements/ilc/27mtg_aosis_1.pdf.

[44] New Zealand Immigration, 2025. https://www.immigration.govt.nz/visas/pacific-access-category-resident-visa/ (Accessed 12 September 2025)

[45] Conducted in 2025 in Australia with experts and officials, the UK with officials from the International Maritime Organization, and Switzerland with diplomatic representation at the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

often overlooked in migration governance yet are the very threads that sustain national identity across generations. As such, regional frameworks, such as those emerging from the PIF and the AOSIS, increasingly acknowledge these dimensions, but practical mechanisms like cultural programmes and support for diaspora communities remain underdeveloped.

The case of Tuvalu has become emblematic of attempts to formalise cultural preservation as a component of statehood. In early September 2023, Tuvalu—which is expected to be one of the first countries in the world to be completely lost to climate change—enacted constitutional amendments that include a new definition of statehood. Article 2(1) of the Constitution of Tuvalu Bill (2022) stipulates that '[t]he [s]tate of Tuvalu within its historical, cultural and legal framework shall remain in perpetuity in the future, notwithstanding the impacts of climate change or other causes resulting in loss to the physical territory of Tuvalu'.

Complementing this, Tuvalu's announcement at COP27 that it would become the first 'digital nation' reflects an unprecedented experiment in continuity.[46] By digitally recreating its territory, archiving history and cultural heritage and shifting governmental functions online, Tuvalu seeks to ensure that its people retain a collective identity and political presence even as land diminishes. Furthermore, a permanent digital replica of Tuvalu would substitute its physical land.[47] Whether a digital nation can gain full recognition remains an open legal question—former Foreign Minister Kofe called on all countries forming relations with Tuvalu to recognise the statehood of the nation as permanent notwithstanding the existence of land territory[48]—but it symbolically represents the claim that sovereignty and identity do not depend on physical geography alone.

CONCLUSION

Preserving legal statehood in the face of sea-level rise is only half of the challenge; equally important is ensuring that displaced populations retain rights, dignity and identity. As this chapter has shown, these two problems are intertwined. Recognition of a de-territorialised state without a parallel framework for mobility and protection risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, leaving

[46] See Global Forum for Migration and Development at https://www.gfmd.org/pfp/ppd/19211#:~:text=Summary%3A,functions%20into%20a%20digital%20space. (Last accessed 25 July 2024).

[47] In fact, Foreign Minister Kofe has called on all countries forming relations with Tuvalu to recognise the statehood of the nation as permanent, even if Tuvalu loses all its land territory due to sea level rise, see 'Protecting Tuvalu's Statehood' Chain Reaction (June 17 2022) <www.foe.org.au/protecting_tuvalus_statehood>.

[48] Protecting Tuvalu's Statehood' Chain Reaction (June 17 2022) <www.foe.org.au/protecting_tuvalus_statehood>.

affected populations legally exposed even as their state endures on paper. The current international legal order—grounded in land territory as the anchor of sovereignty and in narrow definitions of various causes of mobility—does not yet provide a coherent response to these twin challenges. The pressing question is therefore not whether international law must adapt, but how it can do so and through which instruments.

Practice and innovation suggest emerging pathways forward. The first proceeds through the authoritative reinterpretation and consolidation of existing law, while the second requires the creation of new binding instruments. Much of the most significant movement in reinterpretation has happened more readily than terra-centric orthodoxy might predict. The ILC's affirmation of a strong presumption in favour of continuing statehood, combined with the ICJ's confirmation in its advisory opinion that a constituent element of statehood may be lost, together begin to detach legal personality from the existence of land. The PIF's insistence that maritime entitlements and baselines persist notwithstanding physical change points in the same direction. These developments thus convert what SIDS have long advanced as aspiration into emerging jurisprudence.

Yet, interpretation does have its limits. It can preserve the legal personality of the state but it cannot, on its own, generate enforceable protection for the people of the state and this remains a lacuna. The refugee and statelessness regimes were not designed for the wholesale loss of territory and *ex-situ* citizenship, however promising, depends on recognition that is not yet forthcoming. Without it, continuity risks becoming a legal fiction. Closing this gap could happen through a dedicated instrument on displacement caused by climate change or through the multilateralisation of existing compacts such as the Falepili Union Treaty or PAC.

Crucially, the Pacific provides an early example of a wider pattern, where the significance of the analysis extends well beyond the region on which it has focussed. The stresses traced herein are transregional: the same tension between a terra-centric legal order and a receding coastline is already emerging in the Western Indian Ocean, where low-lying states confront similar pressures on territory, population and maritime entitlement. The resources for a response are likewise not confined to the Pacific. The Kampala Convention already provides an illustration of a binding regional regime recognising displacement caused by disasters and the effects of climate change. Its confinement to internal displacement speaks to the cross-border gap that persists globally, even as it proves that such instruments can be successfully built.

Whatever legal solution prevails—what this may be remains difficult to say definitively—must carry the intangible. Recognition and mobility that fail to also protect language, spiritual practice and kinship risk reducing continuity to an empty form and rendering displacement a double erasure of both territory and identity. The preliminary findings from the field shared herein underscore that affected communities themselves place these dimensions at the centre of what continuity means. Tuvalu's constitutional entrenchment of perpetual statehood and its Digital Nation initiative are best read as attempts to hold identity and sovereignty together once land can no longer anchor them.

Sea-level rise thus exposes a fundamental gap in the international system, but it also creates an opportunity to demonstrate adaptability. In compelling us to countenance the legally continuous yet territorially absent state, it destabilises the terra-centric language of sovereignty, territory and political membership on which both IR and IL rest, and renders visible the asymmetry between high-emitting territorially secure states and low-emitting, low-lying ones. Whether the rules-based order can hold statehood, sovereignty and identity together in the absence of land will determine not only the fate of many SIDS but also the credibility of the rules-based order itself.

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PART II
AFRICA AND OCEAN REGIONS GOVERNANCE

CHAPTER SEVEN

GOVERNING AFRICAN OCEAN REGIONS: ASSERTING STRATEGIC AGENCY THROUGH INTERNATIONAL LAW OR THE RULES-BASED ORDER?

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INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 'Oceanic Century' has fundamentally transformed the global maritime domain from a mere conduit for shipping and commerce into a central arena of contestation, encompassing geopolitical rivalry, competition for marine resources and strategic agency. For Africa, a continent once marginalised as an object rather than a subject of international law during the colonial era (Rembe 1980), the sea has become a vital frontier for asserting regional autonomy and seeking a more equitable global order. This chapter considers how African states navigate the growing jurisprudential divide between the universal discipline of international law and the increasingly invoked 'rules-based international order' (RBO) (Dugard 2023).

It argues that Africa's maritime strategy is firmly rooted in international law, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which serves as the keystone for ocean governance (United Nations General Assembly 2024 para 96). Unlike the RBO, which Durgard (2023) has criticised as an amorphous, Western-led project that promotes exceptionalism and double standards, international law offers a stable framework grounded in sovereign equality and consent. Africa's role as a 'norm entrepreneur' is not new; the continent was instrumental in the creation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the principle of the 'common heritage of humankind' during the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) (Rembe 1980), thereby actively shaping the modern law of the sea.

This chapter traces the evolution of African maritime agency in policy development across three critical phases, selected as illustrative examples. First, it examines how the piracy crisis off the Horn of Africa, which reached epidemic proportions between 2006 and 2012, catalysed a shift from reactive security to permanent, law-based policies, such as Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050 (AIMS 20250) and the African Charter on Maritime Security, Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter) adopted in 2016. Second, it analyses the Combined Exclusive Maritime Zone of Africa (CEMZA) as an innovative governance model that reconsiders traditional Westphalian sovereignty to protect collective community interests. Finally, it highlights Africa's recent legal activism in the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) Advisory Opinion on Climate Change (ITLOS 2024), where the African Union (AU) advocated for global accountability within the framework of a consensual, treaty-based legal order.

INTERNATIONAL LAW, THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE GENESIS OF AFRICAN CONTINENTAL OCEAN GOVERNANCE

Germane to Africa's assertion of regional agency and economic rebalancing is the choice between two competing frameworks: the established regime of international law and the increasingly invoked RBO. I argue here that African ocean governance is fundamentally aligned with the former, as the codified, universal and consent-based nature of international law provides a more equitable framework for the continent than the amorphous and often exclusionary RBO. The distinction between international law and the RBO is not merely semantic; it represents a significant jurisprudential divide. International law is a universal system that has governed state behaviour for centuries and is founded on the sovereign equality of states, the UN Charter and the responsibility of states and international organisations (Strydom et al. 2016).

Regarding this regime of international law, a Chinese Foreign Minister commented that '[i]nternational rules must be based on international law and must be written by all. They are not the patent or privilege of a few. They must be applicable to all countries, and there should be no room for exceptionalism or double standards' (cited in Dugard 2023: 230). Historically, newly independent African states questioned whether international law took their specific needs and requirements into account or reflected their particular interests (Zouapet 2023). However, Zouapet surmises that 'Africa seems to be gradually moving away from

its distrust of international law to embrace it. It is, therefore, an Africa that is particularly active in the development of international law, and no longer merely the object or a simple consumer of the rules of international law' (Zouapet 2023: xi).

In contrast, the proponents of the RBO refer to general principles of international law, such as self-determination, territorial integrity and freedom of navigation, but do not consider how these principles are applied within the framework of multilateral treaties, customary rules and dispute settlement procedures. Accordingly, they do not address their binding force or enforceability (Dugard 2023). As a result, Dugard (2023) contends that the RBO is an alternative, competing regime outside the discipline of international law, advocated by Western states to impose an interpretation of international law that best advances Western interests. A consequence of this is that the RBO is seen to be 'broad, open to political manipulation and double standards' (Dugard 2023: 226). Furthermore, Beqiraj, Anastasiadou and Darnopykh (2024: 8) note that '[r]ules, however, are not neutral but reflect the interests and values of the states that sustain them' and argue that 'there is no single rules-based order or system'.

Africa's preference for international law over the RBO is rooted in the continent's historical experience with shifting global power dynamics. On Africa Day in 2022, diplomatic speeches addressed to the continent highlighted that a small group of Western countries use the RBO to impose a 'unipolar model' where 'exceptional' countries lead while others must obey the 'club of the chosen' (Dugard 2023; Lavrov 2022; Klomegah 2022). For African states, the sovereign equality guaranteed by international law is a vital shield against external interference and power asymmetries (Rembe 1980). International law requires that rules be consensual; thus, no state can be bound by a rule it has not accepted (Dugard 2023). This is particularly relevant in ocean governance, where UNCLOS, often called the constitution for the oceans, establishes a comprehensive legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas (United Nations General Assembly 2024). Because the RBO lacks defined rules for law-making and often justifies 'non-consensual methods for resolving international disputes' (Dugard 2023: 228), it is inherently less stable for African nations seeking to protect their maritime interests.

Africa's alignment with international law is most visible in its active role as a norm entrepreneur during the negotiations at UNCLOS III between 1973-1982 (Egede 2023). Following decolonisation, African states moved to renegotiate Eurocentric maritime laws and concepts, such as freedom of navigation, that

had previously excluded them. Driven by a blue/ocean economy developmental approach, African states sought to rebalance the international economic order through the seas (Egede 2023). One of the most significant African contributions to the modern law of the sea is the concept of the EEZ. Originally proposed by Kenya to the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee in 1971, the EEZ, as a functional maritime zone, was designed to grant coastal states sovereign rights over living and non-living resources up to 200 nautical miles from their baselines (Egede 2023). The erstwhile Organisation of African Unity (OAU) mobilised the continent around this idea, ensuring its integration into UNCLOS (Egede 2023). This was a marked shift in ocean governance, moving away from the traditional *mare liberum* (freedom of the seas) model that allowed technologically advanced nations to exploit resources off the African coast with impunity (Bastos 2012: 110; Egede 2023). Furthermore, African states were instrumental in advocating for the Continental Shelf (CS) regime and the internationalisation of the Seabed Area (the Area) beyond national jurisdiction (Egede 2023; Rembe 1980). Africa also pushed for the principle that the resources of the deep seabed are the 'common heritage of humankind', which eventually led to the establishment of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) (Egede 2023). These policy contributions demonstrated that Africa did not merely follow international law but also actively shaped it to ensure that the equitable and efficient use of ocean resources benefits all, including landlocked states (Egede 2023). Currently, AIMS 2050 stipulates that '[p]utting Africa's maritime sector in the center *[sic]* stage during international discussions associated with African or global maritime agenda is crucial for longlasting meaningful development of the [African Maritime Domain]' (African Union 2014a: par 98).

The African region, geographically divided into five regions in a resolution of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU 1976), viewed international law not as a static set of rules inherited from the colonial past, but rather as a dynamic and universal framework that can be steered towards regional prosperity. By favouring the codified discipline of the UNCLOS framework over the amorphous and discriminatory RBO, Africa asserts its right to be a subject, rather than an object, of global history. This legal activism serves as a foundation for the continent's subsequent maritime policies that are discussed below, and which aim to secure the African Maritime Domain (AMD) as a stable, secure space for wealth creation and regional integration.

THE PIRACY IMPETUS: FROM VULNERABILITY TO AFRICAN MARITIME AGENCY

Having set out Africa's normative preference for international law over an amorphous rules-based order, I here examine how a specific crisis, the surge of Somali-based piracy between 2006 and 2012, served as the primary catalyst for transforming African maritime policy. Cropsey (2017: xi) observes that:

> "[t]hroughout history, great maritime powers that forgot, neglected, or were otherwise distracted from the oceanic anchor of their commerce and security fell from their high positions. Such amnesia or strategic befuddlement is called seablindness."

Historically characterised by this seablindness, African states were initially ill-equipped to handle the surge of maritime crime (Potgieter 2015). However, the response to piracy reveals a fundamental tension: whereas, through external powers, such as NATO's Operation Shield and the European Union's Operation Atalanta, an order-focused, interventionist 'rules-based' approach was sought, African states leveraged the crisis to build permanent legal frameworks and regional agreements that are rooted in international law.

For decades, African security thinking was predominantly terracentric, and the AMD was not at the forefront of AU policy (Vreÿ 2013: 1). The brazen acts of Somali pirates against international shipping however changed this trajectory, drawing global media attention and exposing the continent's vulnerability (International Chamber of Commerce 2013). Piracy flourished in the ungoverned spaces off the Horn of Africa (Brenthurst Foundation 2010) owing to a substantial lack of capacity in the Somali state to police its own waters (United Nations Security Council 2008). This crisis was, in many ways, described as a blessing in disguise for African agency (Potgieter 2015). It forced a re-evaluation of the maritime domain, moving it from the periphery to the centre of the continental security debate (Bueger 2015; Stockbruegger 2014: 110). The need to address the epithet 'you cannot control what you cannot patrol' (Kings 2016) in the context of the piracy epidemic sparked an unprecedented drive for regional maritime integration.

The global response to piracy initially followed a model frequently associated with the RBO: the creation of ad hoc, exceptional rules to manage a specific security threat. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1816 (2008) was a landmark in this regard, authorising foreign naval forces to enter Somali

territorial waters to repress piracy (United Nations Security Council 2008). This was a dramatic departure from established international law, as Article 105 of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: 1982) normally limits universal enforcement jurisdiction to the High Seas. To navigate this, the text of the resolution emphasised the *ad hoc* and *sui generis* nature of its measures (United Nations Security Council 2008: para. 9). The Resolution contained a deliberate caveat: they were not to be 'considered as establishing customary international law' (United Nations Security Council 2008: para. 9). This reveals a core characteristic of the RBO outlined by Dugard (2023) earlier, namely the use of exceptionalism and temporary rules to bypass the perceived discipline or limitations of codified international law (Houghton 2009: 253). African states were wary of this exceptional order. During the deliberations on Resolution 1816 (2008), delegations from South Africa, Libya and China expressed deep scepticism about tampering with an enforcement regime that violated the sanctity of territorial sovereignty (Petrig and Geiß 2011; United Nations Security Council 2008). For these states, the solution was not temporary intervention but rather institutional capacity-building in the framework of international law.

African actors demonstrated agency through the development of the AIMS 2050 and the Lomé Charter, adopted in 2016. Rather than accepting a secondary role in a Western-led security order, the AU sought to frame the ocean as a site of African renaissance and economic development. AIMS 2050 explicitly adopted the 'IC5' principle, namely: 'Information Sharing, Communication, Collaboration, Cooperation, Capacity-building and Coordination' as guiding philosophies (United Nations Security Council 2008: para. 22). It aimed to move beyond the immediate piracy threat towards a sustainable, thriving Blue Economy (United Nations Security Council 2008: para. 18). Through AIMS 2050, we see a move from reactive security to proactive law-making. The strategy emphasises that 'all related binding legal instruments [must be] ratified … and domesticated' in accordance with international law (United Nations Security Council 2008: para. 12).

The African preference for law-based regional solutions is best exemplified by the Djibouti Code of Conduct (International Maritime Organisation 2009). This agreement, while inspired by the need to suppress piracy, contains obligations that must be carried out 'in a manner consistent with the principles of sovereign equality and territorial integrity of states and that of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other States' (International Maritime Organisation 2009: art. 2(3)). Crucially, the Code of Conduct sought to harmonise regional efforts within the UNCLOS framework (International Maritime Organisation

2009: preamble). Article 4(4) of the Code of Conduct mirrors the UNCLOS enforcement provision, and Article 4(5) ensures that any pursuit into territorial seas is 'subject to the authority' of the coastal state. This demonstrates a commitment to multilateralism and consensus-building, both of which are cardinal to international law, rather than the non-consensual methods often favoured by the RBO (Bastos 2012: 110; Dugard 2023).

The international anti-piracy response reveals a tension between order-focused maritime governance and law-based regional solutions. The international community, focused on the 'security of commercial maritime routes', prioritised immediate interdiction and burden sharing (United Nations Security Council 2017). In contrast, African states viewed piracy as a symptom of deeper structural inequalities and sought to protect their sovereign rights to the resources within their EEZs (African Union 2014a). The Lomé Charter further solidified this by legally obligating states to 'protect [their] maritime territories ... in conformity with the relevant international laws and principles' (African Union 2016). This was a move to ensure that foreign intervention remained the exception rather than the rule. The goal was to transition from outsourcing maritime security to international partners towards an African-owned security architecture (Brenthurst Foundation 2010; Baker 2011: 9).

While the threat of piracy exposed the continent's vulnerability, Africa's response was not to abandon international law in favour of a Western-led RBO. Instead, African states acted as norm entrepreneurs, creating regional agreements such as the Lomé Charter and strategic frameworks such as AIMS 2050 to master the maritime domain on their own terms (Baker 2011: 9). This agency turned a security crisis into an opportunity for regional integration, ensuring that the 'Oceanic Century' remains governed by a universal legal framework that respects sovereign equality and prioritises the long-term stability of the AMD.

THE COMBINED EXCLUSIVE MARITIME ZONE OF AFRICA (CEMZA): A PARADIGM SHIFT IN COLLECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Having outlined how the piracy crisis catalysed a shift from seablindness to strategic maritime policy, I now explore one of the most ambitious and conceptually innovative outcomes of this transformation: CEMZA. CEMZA was introduced as a strategic objective in AIMS 2050. While African countries support and advocate for collective security mechanisms and peaceful conflict-

resolution processes within the framework of international law (Beqiraj, Anastasiadou and Darnopykh 2024), CEMZA represents a unique reimagining of ocean governance. It moves beyond the traditional regime of fragmented national maritime domains towards a vision of a 'common African maritime space without barriers' (African Union 2014a: para. 30). I outline here the conceptual foundations of CEMZA and consider its juridical implications for sovereignty, its compatibility with the UNCLOS framework and the challenges attending its implementation.

The AMD is vast, encompassing thirteen million km^2 of EEZs and a coastline of 26 000 nautical miles (African Union 2014a: preambular para. 1). Historically, this domain has been fragmented into nearly 40 distinct national maritime jurisdictions (Vrancken 2020), a legacy of the Westphalian state model that often hindered collective action against transnational threats (Molenaar 2015: 251). The AU describes the Blue Economy and the AMD as a 'new frontier of African renaissance' (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2016). CEMZA is the institutional expression of this renaissance. It is defined as a concept aimed at boosting intra-African trade, simplifying administrative procedures and fostering the integration of internal markets for maritime services (African Union 2014a: para. 30). By creating a unitary space for cooperation, CEMZA seeks to transform the AMD from a site of external exploitation into a platform for regional prosperity (African Union 2014a). This unitary space would enable the African Continental Free Trade Agreement by facilitating the actual flow of goods across African waters, turning legal trade agreements into a physical reality. It is a 'bold manifesto' of Africa's intent to manage its own resources for the benefit of its people (Nmehielle and Pasipanodya 2017: 52), echoing the norm entrepreneurship that characterised Africa's earlier contributions to establishing the EEZ.

The primary legal challenge posed by CEMZA is its relationship with traditional state sovereignty under international law. Critics and member states alike have expressed wariness about whether a 'combined' zone requires states to cede their sovereign rights (Potgieter and Walker 2015: 110; Vrancken 2018: 223). However, AIMS 2050 makes it clear that the strategy must not be applied in ways that conflict with the existing legal framework of its member states (African Union 2014a: para 13 and Annex B). To resolve this tension, Tanaka (2011: 374) points to the doctrine of *dédoublement fonctionnel*, or role splitting. This theory posits that those national members of the executive of the respective member state act in a dual capacity: as state organs when operating domestically and as international agents when operating within a regional

or global system (Cassese 1990: 212). Under this model, the CEMZA does not necessarily require the pooling of sovereignty (ownership), but rather the pooling of jurisdiction (the power to rule and enforce) (Surbun 2021). Tanaka identifies models for protecting community interests, suggesting an institutional application of *dédoublement fonctionnel*, where states act under the auspices of the AU to share information and co-ordinate surveillance (Tanaka 2011: 374). This model appears to be the most realistic path for CEMZA. This perspective allows the AU to protect community interests, such as combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and maritime crime, without requiring states to formally surrender their territorial sovereignty and integrity (Surbun 2021; Vrancken 2018: 223).

An analysis of Articles 29 and 30 of CEMZA in AIMS 2050, read with Annexes B and C, indicates that the CEMZA framework is intended to complement rather than replace the UNCLOS regime. While UNCLOS focuses on zonal management through the spatial distribution of state jurisdiction based on distance from the coast, CEMZA advocates an Integrated Management Approach based on common interests (Tanaka 2008). This integration is evident in other AU instruments, such as the Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture (African Union 2014b). This policy identifies weak, uncoordinated management of transboundary resources as a primary threat. Its sections advocate regional collaborative management, the harmonisation of legislation for shared resources and the establishment of subregional fisheries organisations. This aligns with the Integrated Management Approach, which seeks to overcome the divergence between artificial legal boundaries and the biological reality of migratory species (Tanaka 2008). Furthermore, CEMZA envisions a common information-sharing environment that enables the convergence of tracking systems for maritime safety, border control, and environmental protection (African Union 2014a). By functioning as an issue-specific combined zone, CEMZA provides a legal architecture for collective security and economic development that UNCLOS's spatially limited provisions cannot provide on their own (Surbun 2021).

Despite its innovative potential, CEMZA largely remains a concept on paper and to date it has not come into operation. The 2050 AIM Strategy set short-term goals for establishing a Strategic Special Task Force (SSTF) to prepare a technical file, including charts of the CEMZA limits, but these goals have not been fully met (African Union 2014a: Annex C). This reveals the significant gap between the AU's ability to set norms and its capacity to implement them (Brits and Nel 2018: 232).

Gottschalk (2018) outlines several obstacles that hinder the operationalisation of CEMZA: (i) technical constraints, such as continental hydrographic capacity which many African states currently lack; (ii) inter-state disputes about maritime boundary delimitation; (iii) harmonisation and legal fragmentation, where state parties would need to incorporate and harmonise the CEMZA provisions into their domestic legislation and other instruments adopted by the AU and should cross-reference the CEMZA provisions in their definition and use of the term AMD; and (iv) motivational malaise, where scholars observe that when maritime threats like piracy decrease, political will often fades—causing nominal targets such as '2030, 2050, 2063' to become a mirage that retreats further into the future.

Ultimately, CEMZA offers a new perspective on ocean governance by shifting the focus from seablindness to strategic autonomy. It represents an innovation in protecting the continent's common interests. If fully realised, with the required operationalisation envisaged in AIMS 2050, CEMZA would allow Africa to move from outsourcing its security to international partners towards an African-owned security architecture. By fostering a secure maritime environment through collective jurisdiction, CEMZA facilitates what some term continental sovereignty (Kornegay 2012: 71). The CEMZA concept confirms that the African oceans are not merely empty spaces between landmasses, but also vital spaces where power, trade and ecological protection are inextricably linked. Therefore, I argued in this section that while the technical and political hurdles in implementation are formidable, the conceptual shift offered by CEMZA is essential for transforming Africa into a leading maritime actor in the Oceanic Century.

AFRICA AND THE ITLOS ADVISORY OPINION: LEGAL ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The final component of Africa's modern maritime agency is its engagement with the evolving intersections of environmental science and the law of the sea. On 21 May 2024, ITLOS delivered a landmark unanimous advisory opinion in Case No. 31 (ITLOS 2024). Although the advisory opinion does not constitute a legally binding decision on the parties, it fundamentally alters the global maritime legal landscape. The Tribunal found that anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions constitute 'pollution of the marine environment' according to UNCLOS (ITLOS 2024: para. 441.3). Consequently, the Tribunal establishes that states have specific 'stringent' due diligence obligations to take all necessary measures to prevent, reduce and control such pollution (ITLOS 2024: para. 441.3).

The proceedings marked a historic milestone for the continental agency, as it was the first time the AU appeared in a case before ITLOS (2024: paras 31 and 339). Representing its 55 member states and over fifteen per cent of the world's population, the AU moved from the periphery of maritime law-making to assert its voice (ITLOS 2024: para. 339). The AU's participation was motivated by the asymmetric impact of climate change: although Africa contributes only 3.8 per cent of global GHG emissions, it bears a disproportionate burden of the resulting ocean acidification, sea-level rise, and ecosystem collapse (ITLOS 2024: paras 50, 51, 327, 339).

A core African contribution to the opinion was the insistence on the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) (ITLOS 2024: paras 35, 131, 143). The AU argued that UNCLOS should not be viewed as a relic of the past but rather as a living instrument to be interpreted in the light of modern environmental regimes such as the Paris Agreement (ITLOS 2024: paras 127, 130). The AU successfully pushed for a legal standard under which developed states bear a heavier mitigation burden and are obligated to provide financial assistance, technology transfer, and capacity-building to developing regions (ITLOS 2024: paras. 182, 190, 202, 227). Furthermore, the AU submitted that mere compliance with the Paris Agreement is insufficient to satisfy UNCLOS obligations (ITLOS 2024: paras. 18, 187, 341). The AU argued that, while the Paris regime allows continued emissions, subject to temperature targets, article 194 requires states to 'prevent' and 'reduce' pollution (ITLOS 2024: para. 21). This bold stance challenged the global status quo, framing the protection of the AMD not just as a policy goal but also as a binding requirement for the survival of coastal communities.

This engagement aligns with the tenor of this chapter: Africa's preference for international law over a rules-based order. By seeking a formal advisory opinion from an UN-established Tribunal, Africa reified its commitment to a universal treaty-based discipline (ITLOS 2024: para. 5, 340). The AU's arguments leveraged the sovereign equality of states to demand accountability from high-emitting nations—a sharp contrast with the exceptionalism often associated with an amorphous RBO. Finally, the opinion reinforces the Blue Economy and collective governance themes discussed under the section on CEMZA. The AU's focus on the human dimension, specifically the threats to African fisheries, food security and the existential risk to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) demonstrates that for Africa, ocean governance is a developmental imperative (ITLOS 2024: paras 3, 4, 24, 118, 119, 121). Through this legal activism, Africa has transitioned from being an object of maritime law to a norm entrepreneur,

ensuring that the Constitution for the Oceans is used as a shield to protect the continent's strategic and ecological future (Egede 2023).

In a recent example of an inter-state dispute concerning maritime boundary delimitation between Ghana and Togo, the government of Ghana issued a statement announcing its decision to have the maritime boundary delimited by recourse to international arbitration under UNCLOS (Presidency Communications 2026). The decision by the government of Ghana to resolve its maritime boundary dispute with Togo through international arbitration under UNCLOS serves as a pertinent modern example of African strategic agency opting for the universal, consent-based discipline of international law.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of African ocean governance in the Oceanic Century underscores a definitive shift from historical seablindness to assertive strategic agency. This chapter has argued that Africa's pursuit of regional prosperity and security is intrinsically tied to the discipline of international law rather than the amorphous RBO. While the latter is frequently critiqued as a 'one-sided Western project' that facilitates exceptionalism and double standards, Africa's alignment with international law, UNCLOS, upholds the cardinal principles of international law, such as sovereign equality**.**

African agency was notably catalysed by the piracy crisis off the East African seaboard, which transitioned the continent from a state of vulnerability to one of norm entrepreneurship. By developing strategic frameworks such as AIMS 2050 and the Lomé Charter, African states rejected *sui generis* ad hoc responses associated with an RBO, in favour of permanent, law-based regional solutions. This shift towards collective governance is most ambitiously expressed in the CEMZA concept, which seeks to transform the AMD into a borderless space for prosperity by pooling jurisdiction and 'continental sovereignty'.

Furthermore, the recent ITLOS advisory opinion on climate change serves as a historic milestone for continental agency, marking the first time the AU appeared as a legal participant before the Tribunal. By successfully arguing that greenhouse gas emissions constitute marine pollution, Africa has reified its commitment to using international law as a tool for climate justice and accountability. The 2024 UN Report of the Secretary-General on Oceans and the Law of the Sea reaffirms that UNCLOS remains the keystone of global ocean governance (United Nations General Assembly 2024: para. 96), and the high level of engagement in the climate change debate underscores the relevance of convention-based institutions in addressing existential global threats.

Ultimately, Africa prioritises a legal regime characterised by inclusive multilateral law-making over an RBO that operates as the private domain of a few powerful actors. The universalism of international law provides a sounder recipe for regional autonomy than the discriminatory nuances of a unipolar RBO. Through its active role in UNCLOS and ITLOS, Africa continues to craft a renaissance beneath the waves, ensuring that its strategic interests are secured within a stable, consensual and equitable global legal order.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN 'SMALL' STATES THINK BIG: ARTICULATING AGENCY THROUGH SEYCHELLES' LARGE OCEAN STATE NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Oceans cover more than 72% of the earth's surface, yet as former Seychellois President James Michel (2016: 10–11) observes, they have 'never been viewed as being as important as land'. De Carvalho and Leira (2022: 1) make a similar observation, suggesting that within the discipline of International Relations (IR), in particular, there has been a tendency to pretend that oceans are not there. If oceans themselves have long occupied a marginal place in global consciousness, islands have been granted an even smaller role, reflecting what Pascaline Alexandre (Chapter 9, Part II) labels 'island-blindness'. At times, islands have 'barely featured in the consciousness of the rest of the world' or, in the rare instances where they have been recognised, it is more the 'idea' of the island rather than lived experiences that have attracted the most interest (Baldacchino 2010: 33; Michel 2016: 11). However, considering the existential threats that these islands face, such as complete submersion by rising sea levels (see Otto and Rydberg, Chapter 6 in Part I), it is imperative to reconceptualise the value attributed to them in IR scholarship.

Indeed, as Michel (2016: 10) poignantly states, 'there are times in history when nothing, but a complete inversion of thinking will suffice'. Adopting the necessity of such an inversion, this chapter examines how Small Island Developing States (SIDS)[49] are contesting this historical marginalisation by reframing themselves as

[49] The SIDS category was first officially recognised by the international community at the 1992 United Nations

Large Ocean States (LOS)[50]. It does so by focusing specifically on the archipelago of Seychelles, located in the Southwest Indian Ocean (SWIO), a region also known as Indianocéania.[51] At first glance, Seychelles appears to exemplify the structural vulnerabilities commonly associated with SIDS. Its economy remains heavily dependent on tourism and fisheries, it is acutely exposed to the impacts of climate change (McDougall 2025: 3), and like many other small and micro-states, it possesses limited administrative capacity (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 183). Yet, these very constraints make Seychelles a particularly significant case to consider given its pioneering role in advancing the Blue Economy agenda (Michel 2016: 30). It was intentionally selected because it contributes to theories of small state[52] agency, while also challenging portrayals of African states as largely reactive actors in international relations (Bach 2013; Acharya 2014; Otto and Moeng 2025). In this sense, it also has the potential to offer insights into how African states can move beyond their traditional land-centric focus.

Writing on the marginalisation and invisibility of islands in the Pacific, Hau'ofa (1994: 152) famously suggested that there is a fundamental difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and a 'sea of islands'. In the first instance, dry surfaces in a vast ocean far removed from the centres of power are emphasised. Such a view is necessary for major powers that benefit from seeing the area as tiny, divided bits, as it helps perpetuate neocolonial relationships of dependency (Hau'ofa 1994: 159). In contrast, the latter view emphasises the interconnectedness of these islands through the ocean, which acts not as a barrier or source of isolation but as a connector. In these instances, SIDS are imagined as LOS. Indeed, it is worthwhile to note that SIDS are approximately 3.5% land and 96.5% ocean (Mead 2021). Viewing the ocean as an enabling force, rather than

Conference on Environment and Development as representing a unique group of states that face distinct social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities (Mead 2021).

[50] Some states also draw on the 'Big Ocean State' (BOS) narrative. This framing has been chosen by those who wish to avoid the acronym LOS (for Large Ocean States), as it resembles the word 'loss' and carries negative connotations (Raguain 2025). By contrast, Big Ocean State echoes the word 'boss', which is seen as more empowering. In this chapter, however, the term Large Ocean State is used, as it remains the more widely adopted label among states.

[51] Indianocéania is a term specifically used by the Indian Ocean Commission to designate the islands of the Southwestern Indian Ocean. The Commission argues that the conventional geographical label 'Southwestern Indian Ocean' neither captures the uniqueness nor coherence of the region. In response, Indianocéania denotes a shared insular space, defined as the 'geographical areas made up of islands and archipelagos that emerge off East Africa' (IOC 2023: 5).

[52] Small Island Developing States fall within the broader category of small states—an analytical grouping that has traditionally received scholarly attention primarily through lenses that emphasise constraint, vulnerability and limited agency. Within much of this literature, small states are frequently defined in deficit terms, portrayed as possessing little capacity to shape their external environment and as being structurally subordinate to major powers (Schwarzenberger [1941] 1964; Vandenbosch 1964; Vital 1967; Rothstein 1968; Keohane 1969; Knudsen 2002). SIDS are subject to an additional layer of marginalisation, as their insularity is often associated with isolation, fragility and heightened vulnerability. As a result, SIDS are characterised by a double deficit: they are understood both as small states, inheriting assumptions of powerlessness, and as islands, reintroducing narratives of exposure and dependence.

as a constraint, has started to gain traction in the thinking of SIDS. Hume et al. (2021) trace the emergence of states identifying as LOS to 2001 when Nauru—a Pacific island—first used the term. Since then, at least fifteen other SIDS have labelled themselves as LOS in official speeches. This category is used specifically to stress the ocean's central role in their development and to reconceptualise SIDS as leaders rather than victims of their circumstances (Raguain et al. 2025: 205).

Both the SIDS and LOS labels function as multi-oceanic political groupings, with these narratives circulating across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as the Caribbean Sea (Hume et al. 2021: 7). This underscores, at times, the discursive and narrative-based nature of oceanic regions and helps explain the growing resonance of the LOS framing among Indian Ocean island states. The categorisation of LOS has gradually gained traction in the political discourse of the Indian Ocean islands, particularly Seychelles and Mauritius, as a supplement and sometimes alternative to the more conventional designation of SIDS. Seychelles has explicitly adopted this label in various official contexts, including statements by President Danny Faure (2016–2020) in 2017, President Wavel Ramkalawan (2020–2025) in 2022, and Seychelles' Minister for Agriculture, Climate Change and Environment, Flavien Joubert (2020–2025) in 2025. Mauritius adopted this phrasing in its interventions at the United Nations General Assembly, when former Prime Minister Jugnauth (2017, 2018) referred to Mauritius as a 'Large Ocean State', while it has also adopted the concept in its Government Programme 2025-2029 (Government of Mauritius 2025: 7).

However, the use of the LOS framing in the Indian Ocean has not been as prominent as it has been among Pacific Island states, such as Fiji and Solomon Islands, where the term has been used frequently and fervently, especially over the last five years, making it a central element of their diplomatic self-representation. Indeed, about two-thirds of the states that have used this narrative are from the Pacific (Hume et al. 2021: 7). The Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama (2007–2022), pointed out that 'the change starts with us [...] we are *Large Ocean States* [...] we are the leaders the world looks to here' (Bainimarama 2022). This seems to reflect the views of other Pacific officials. As a Solomon Islands government official, Walter Diamana (2024, personal communication, 24 November), put it when interviewed, 'what the concept of the Large Ocean State means is to tell our friends in the international community that despite the way you see us, we also have another image'.

Against this background, this chapter examines the narrative of the LOS as it manifests in the Indian Ocean, focusing specifically on the African state of Seychelles. Although Seychelles is Africa's most developed country, its high-income status often renders it analytically overlooked (Serumaga 2024), while its small landmass and offshore geographic positioning mean it is frequently excluded from dominant imaginaries of Africa, which tend to end at the continent's shorelines (Hardy 2015). This chapter examines the concept of the LOS and how it is understood and deployed in Seychelles, through an analysis of official government statements, such as speeches and declarations, as well as semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from Seychelles' government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) between June and August 2025. This is especially important since the LOS narrative, although used by government officials and NGOs, is only gradually gaining academic attention.

By engaging with this narrative, this chapter makes two key contributions to the existing body of scholarship. First, it extends the emerging literature on LOS (see also Chan 2018; Hume et al. 2021; Morgan 2022; Raguain et al. 2025) by offering a perspective from Africa within the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). In this sense, it is also able to track how the concept of 'Large Ocean State' travels across regions. Second, by engaging critically with this narrative, it contributes to broader debates on the agency of small states—and specifically small island states—in international politics. The argument is made that SIDS exercise agency by strategically oscillating between the SIDS and LOS labels, demonstrating how narratives can function as a source of power. The chapter begins by reviewing literature that moves beyond framing SIDS solely in terms of vulnerability, highlighting their capacity for influence through non-material forms of power such as narratives. Building on this, the analysis focuses on how the LOS narrative is constructed, how it interacts with the SIDS narrative and how, together, these demonstrate the agency of islands in Indianocéania.

RE-ANCHORING SMALL STATES IN THE LITERATURE: FROM VULNERABILITY TO INFLUENCE

The agency of small island states has received increased scholarly attention. In particular, three themes have emerged that capture this agency: (i) the creative and 'smart' use of diplomatic strategies; (ii) issue-specific engagement; and (iii) the reframing of small island state identity. Together these strands reposition SIDS from vulnerable rule-takers to influential actors.

First, SIDS have exercised agency through their diplomatic strategies. Baruah (2022) shows how islands have demonstrated agency by playing regional powers against one another to pursue growth and opportunity. In the Pacific, Kiribati has, on multiple occasions, switched its diplomatic position on Taiwan to pursue the best economic deal for the country (Baruah 2022: 4). In the Indian Ocean, similar patterns emerge. McDougall and Taneja (2020: 132) discuss the strategic agency of countries such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles. Among these states, the Maldives has not been a passive player in the tussle between India and China but has instead pursued a dual-engagement strategy with both actors. Importantly, the government of the Maldives has demonstrated its ability to make independent decisions, for example, by cancelling an airport contract it had originally allocated to an Indian company and instead awarding it to a Chinese company (McDougall and Taneja 2020: 130).

In the case of Mauritius, deepening its relations with China has ensured that India, its main partner, does not take its influence on the island for granted (McDougall and Taneja 2020: 135). According to McDougall and Taneja (2020: 138; 2024: 236), Seychelles has similarly demonstrated its ability to take independent decisions by cancelling a deal with India to build military facilities on Assomption Island. While a security agreement that allowed a major power to establish a permanent military base on its territory might have provided Seychelles with additional capabilities to monitor its expansive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the country has instead invested in regional cooperation mechanisms that enhance its maritime domain awareness and response capacity without compromising sovereignty. Central to this approach is the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), hosted in Seychelles, which serves as a regional operational hub for co-ordinated maritime security efforts within the Maritime Security Architecture of the Western Indian Ocean (Ministry of Homeland Security and Civil Affairs, Seychelles 2025). This framework enables Seychelles to capitalise on collective assets and intelligence, while maintaining full control over its territorial jurisdiction and avoiding the establishment of a foreign military presence on its soil through bilateral agreements.

More broadly, SIDS adopt balancing strategies, cultivating multiple partnerships to extract benefits (Baruah 2022: 4; Marggraff 2026). Traditional frameworks for understanding small state foreign policy[53] need to be expanded

[53] Traditional frameworks describing small state foreign policy posit a limited set of strategic options, most commonly including balancing or bandwagoning (see Karsh 1989; Walt 1987; Reiter 1994), hedging (see Kuik 2021; Koga 2018) and seeking neutrality or non-alignment (see Rothstein 1968). Building on this tradition, Breuning (2007), drawing on Hey's (1993) work, suggests that small states in the Global South can pursue either a compliant, consensus, counter-dependent or compensation foreign policy. This approach rests on the shared assumption that small states are structurally dependent on more powerful actors and therefore orient their

to account for the agency of SIDS like Mauritius and Seychelles, which use strategies like manipulating interdependence, fluid partnerships and issue-specific engagement by drawing on their strategic positioning as well as moral advocacy (Marggraff 2025: 73-74). Thus, SIDS are repositioned not only as rule-takers but also as rule-makers.

This agency is also often conceptualised as 'smart state' foreign policy[54]. By positioning themselves as a practical and reliable partner—particularly in counter-piracy and ocean governance—SIDS secure major power support (McDougall and Taneja 2024: 239; McDougall 2025: 161). Graham and Nagar (2023: 248) posit that Seychelles has 'exploited "smart diplomacy", specifically in the field of ocean governance, to enhance its influence in the international arena', while McDougall (2025: 18) suggests that Seychelles has pursued a 'smart state foreign policy'. Malik (2020: 135) reinforces this perspective, noting that major powers require the backing of small and middle states to sustain leadership claims.

Second, SIDS demonstrate agency through issue-specific leadership. Carter and Corbett (2023: 164–165) argue that island states reshaped global security discourse by urging the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to discuss climate change for the first time in 2007, which led to the body recognising climate change as a threat multiplier in 2009. As a region, the Pacific Islands reconfigured regional security beyond traditional military security, compelling major powers to engage climate concerns as a prerequisite for cooperation (Carter and Corbett 2023: 168). Long (2022: 70) reinforces this, suggesting that small island states have come together to redefine climate change as a moral imperative rather than merely a scientific or economic concern. For example, Morgan (2022: 51) discusses their success in securing ocean-focused Sustainable Development Goals, ensuring that the UN's 2030 Agenda did not retain a terrestrial bias. The ocean has thus become central to SIDS' diplomatic identity.

Furthermore, SIDS have exercised leadership in maritime security. During the Somali piracy crisis, Mauritius and Seychelles hosted piracy trials, positioning themselves as indispensable regional actors (Otto 2022: 6). Seychelles' willingness to prosecute pirates attracted extensive capacity-building support,

foreign policies in response to these asymmetrical power relations. While these frameworks differ in emphasis and analytical nuance, taken together they largely portray small states—hedging being a partial exception—as possessing limited room for manoeuvre and constrained agency in shaping their foreign policy choices.

[54] A smart state strategy refers to the ability of a small state to pursue its foreign policy despite its limited resources by focusing on ordered goals, presenting its initiatives as being in the common interest of other states, and being willing to mediate between the conflicting interests of great powers (which allows them to act as agenda-setters) (Grøn and Wivel 2011: 529).

including prison refurbishment, judicial equipment and coastal surveillance systems (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 9). In 2016, it chaired one of the most prominent maritime security governance organisations, namely the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS)—the first time a regional actor assumed this role (Bueger and Wivel 2018: 2). Beyond piracy, Seychelles has further expressed agency by introducing the first ocean debt-swap deal and Blue Bonds (McDougall and Taneja 2024: 239), reinforcing its reputation as a policy innovator.

Third, SIDS increasingly express agency by intentionally reframing their identity from the perception of being 'small, isolated, and vulnerable' to being recognised as LOS (Morgan 2022: 46). Chan (2018: 538) is among the most explicit in developing the idea of LOS. He suggests that 'small islands have traditionally been portrayed as weak states, lacking elements of positive sovereignty' (Chan 2018: 538). However, by reconceptualising their smallness into largeness by including their vast EEZs, they have begun constructing a new sovereignty bargain. According to realist conceptions, a state's territorial size is a measure of power (Chan 2018: 540). By framing themselves as LOS, these islands remind large states of their sovereign rights under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which allows them to explore, exploit, conserve and manage the natural resources within their EEZs (Chan 2018: 540-541). For Seychelles, 99% of its total territory is ocean. Considering this, Raguain et al. (2025: 203–204) suggest that the labels of LOS and Big Ocean States (BOS) are meant to 'accentuate their [SIDS] strength and value'. Indeed, Wiehe, Gray and Silver (2025: 5) point out that when Mauritius is labelled an LOS, it is the nineteenth largest country in the world, while others have suggested an official LOS classification that can be used by international organisations (Hume et al. 2021: 8).

This reconceptualisation of SIDS identity has translated into concrete expressions of agency. Kiribati, an island in the Pacific, established the first significant Marine Protected Area (MPA) in a developing country in 2008. This move has demonstrated its agency in making independent decisions that prioritise the values it espouses, such as ocean sustainability, rather than seeking short-term benefits from tuna-harvesting or fishing licences (Chan 2018: 546). Chan (2018: 538) notes that leaders across the Pacific and Indian Ocean have increasingly adopted the term 'Large Ocean State' to challenge the conventional 'usual "small state" nomenclature'. This shift matters because, as Long (2022: 147) argues, an emphasis on vulnerability alone obscures the way in which such states adapt, exercise agency and engage internationally. He further argues that, historically, Pacific Island communities have been able to adapt to changing environments,

given their experiences with colonisation and world wars; however, this adaptive capacity has not been recognised in external representations of the region (Long 2022: 147). The LOS narrative is therefore an attempt to challenge the label of SIDS, which inherently categorises SIDS as being disadvantaged and possessing limited agency (Raguain et al. 2025: 206–207). Finally, the LOS identity narrative contributes to region-building and the construction of multi-oceanic communities. As van Langenhove (2013: 474) argued, regions are discursively constructed rather than purely territorial. Across the Pacific and Indian Oceans, shared ocean-based identities and vulnerabilities foster narrative coalitions that transcend geography.

STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

The LOS narrative, which is situated within strategic narrative theory, focuses on how actors—in this case, the small island state of Seychelles—use stories to shape the international environment. While the small-state literature provides important insights into how states with limited material capabilities navigate international politics, it is not used here as the central framework. Rather, it provides contextual background for understanding why strategic narratives become particularly salient for small island states. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2017: 105) define strategic narratives as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'. They distinguish between three specific types: system, identity and issue narratives. The focus here is on identity narratives, since, for small island states, they offer a means of influencing the global environment. Identity narratives 'set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017: 21). The narratives can be analysed by engaging with their formation, projection and reception.

This analysis is limited to the first two, that is, the actors involved in constructing the narrative and how it is communicated. Three specific questions will be addressed. First, to what extent is the identity of a 'Large Ocean State' consciously and intentionally adopted by government officials? This is important to consider, since strategic narratives are aimed at influencing the behaviour of others—there is a clear degree of intentionality behind their use (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017: 3). Absent such intentionality, it is unclear whether they would constitute strategic narratives. Second, given that narratives are rarely constructed without contestation, the focus is on which tensions emerge when this narrative

is pursued. Third, in what ways is the Large Ocean State framing—as part of a strategic narrative—a reflection of the growing agency of small islands?

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE *LARGE OCEAN STATE* NARRATIVE

In Seychelles, the origins of the LOS narrative can be traced to the early 2010s, emerging within broader global discussions on sustainability. A key milestone was the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), which popularised the concept of the Green Economy as a pathway to sustainable development (Michel 2016: 30). As former Seychellois Ambassador, Ronny Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) notes, the visual branding of the green economy featured wind turbines, buildings, people and animals, but 'there was no sign of water on it'. This absence underscored a critical oversight: the ocean, despite its centrality to economies, was omitted from the core sustainability imagery. Shah (2015), Chief Executive Officer of Nature Seychelles, recounts a similar experience, albeit ten years earlier: attending the Second Earth Summit (Rio +10) in South Africa in 2002, he noticed that 'the movement to set up Green Economies mysteriously avoided speaking substantively about the oceans, despite our best efforts. Small Island Developing States (SIDS), sitting on small pieces of land seemingly "sea-locked" within large ocean territories, struggled with this concept of the Green Economy'. Thus, within Seychellois policymaking circles, these events were catalysts for a more pronounced effort to incorporate the framing of Seychelles as an LOS.

The importance of including the ocean in sustainability frameworks was also reinforced by the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis, which severely impacted small island economies, including Seychelles. In response, in 2010 Seychelles began discussions with The Nature Conservancy on innovative financing mechanisms to harness ocean resources for economic recovery (Government of Seychelles 2014; Jumeau 2025, personal communication, 7 August). Indeed, as Didier Dogley, former Minister for Environment, Energy and Climate Change in Seychelles, observed: 'In these islands, we used to think only in terms of our terrestrial area, or maybe the coastal zone up to about 35 km from the shore—and we thought of the rest of our 1.4 million km^2 of ocean territory as something that "sat there" without really needing to be managed' (cited in UNDP 2016: 24).

In Seychelles, the emphasis has transitioned away from thinking of Seychelles purely as a SIDS to also considering how it may be perceived and projected

as an LOS. This culminated in the world's first debt-for-ocean-conservation swap, aligning environmental protection with economic resilience. In this case, practical initiatives emerged in parallel with—rather than as a consequence of—the rhetorical framing of the LOS identity. This momentum was further institutionalised in 2015, when Seychelles established the Department of the Blue Economy (Michel 2015; Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August), signalling a strategic commitment to ocean-based development. In this sense, the prioritisation of the ocean in policy and governance frameworks provided a foundation for the subsequent adoption and diffusion of the LOS narrative.

The narrative of the LOS in Seychelles has mostly been developed and promoted by three key actors: the government, NGOs and individuals. In an interview, a government official (2025, personal communication, 6 August) pointed out that it is mainly being propagated by the government, and specifically by the Blue Economy Department. This was confirmed by the Principal Programme Development Officer in the Ministry of Fisheries and the Blue Economy in Seychelles, Ashley Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August). There has been significant momentum from the government, even at the national level, to raise awareness of the ocean's importance. In this sense, it is not always about invoking the LOS vocabulary but about speaking about Seychelles in a way that emphasises the attributes that define this narrative, such as the primacy of the ocean. On another level, NGOs have played an important role in promoting the narrative, albeit unevenly. As former President James Michel (2014) observed in a speech, 'NGOs remind us that we are a large ocean nation'. Indeed, Seychelles Country Director of Parley for the Ocean, Alvania Lawen (2025, private communication, 30 July), who is an ardent advocate of the label, also suggested that NGOs have championed this narrative. However, again, it cannot be said that all NGOs hold this view. Shah (2015) asserts that Nature Seychelles does not advocate for this term and that the label originated overseas, being then adopted by Seychellois as a 'sexy label'.

Finally, influential individuals have adopted and circulated the LOS narrative. Former President Michel (2004–2016) was a firm promoter, stating in a 2017 address that 'we must consider ourselves not as small island states but as Large Ocean States when we consider the extent of our Exclusive Economic Zones'. Indeed, Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August) points out that the narrative started to be emphasised during the Michel presidency, with support from individuals such as former Ambassador Ronny Jumeau. According to the founder of Parley Seychelles, Alvania Lawen (2025, private communication, 30 July), Jumeau was 'the person who brought this term to Seychelles'. Lawen (2025,

private communication, 30 July) recalls how, when she was 14 or 15, Jumeau told her that, although Seychelles is a small island, it is actually a large ocean state. In this sense, the LOS narrative has also been transmitted across generations.

There does not seem to be an official government policy mandating when or how the LOS narrative should be used[55]. Indeed, the term, although featured in speeches by government officials, appears inconsistently. Furthermore, the 'LOS' label is not officially recognised by the UN and therefore has limited use in international forums where funding can be obtained (Shah 2015). Shah (2015) is of the view that there is therefore limited value in the government promoting this narrative. Nevertheless, two distinct channels through which the label is being communicated can be identified. First, the narrative is articulated explicitly, though inconsistently, in government documents, and most prominently, in speeches. As noted, there have been at least three instances in which the LOS narrative has been directly invoked since 2017. Second, the term has been conveyed implicitly through the practices and policies of the Seychelles government, even when the phrase 'Large Ocean State' is not employed. Such practices embody what Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) describes as instances where the narrative is felt rather than named, as demonstrated by the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) negotiations. A prime example of the LOS narrative being practiced but not named is Seychelles' marine spatial planning and the designation of MPAs. In 2012, the Government of Seychelles made the bold pledge to expand marine protection from 0.04% to 30% by 2020, an ambitious target given that the global benchmark of protecting 30% of the oceans was only set for 2030. Indeed, Seychelles was able to announce by 2020 that it had successfully designated 30% of its ocean territory as an MPA, an area larger than Germany's landmass (State House Seychelles 2020).

These examples demonstrate that the LOS narrative is not only a matter of rhetoric but also increasingly embedded in practice. Importantly, while vulnerability-based framing associated with the SIDS narrative remains more effective for mobilising financial resources within the United Nations framework, the LOS narrative serves as a strategic device through which Seychelles articulates leadership, ambition and normative authority in ocean governance. In this sense, actions such as marine spatial planning, the designation of extensive MPAs and

[55] It is worth noting that Mauritius has recently institutionalised the Large Ocean State concept through its Government Programme for 2025-2029, which explicitly states that 'so far considered a Small Island State, Mauritius is positioning itself as a Large Ocean State' (Government of Mauritius 2025). The concept has therefore become part of the country's official developmental and strategic visions. By contrast, there is no equivalent evidence that Seychelles has formally incorporated the concept into a similar domestic policy framework, despite its economy being more heavily dependent on ocean-based sectors than that of Mauritius, whose economy is comparatively more diversified.

leadership in BBNJ negotiations reflect priorities that transcend immediate material gain. The LOS narrative serves to legitimise proactive governance and reposition Seychelles from a recipient of assistance to a pioneer of global ocean stewardship.

REFLECTION ON THE LARGE OCEAN STATE NARRATIVE

LOS as an intentional framing

The LOS narrative has been intentionally and consciously adopted by government officials. While LOS is not always featured in government documents and speeches, this does not indicate that its use is accidental. Indeed, in interviews, government officials from Seychelles indicated that the term was being actively employed to shape how Seychelles is perceived internationally. For example, former Seychellois Ambassador Ronny Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) explained that:

> "People treat you the way you describe yourself. [As SIDS] we are the poor children of the international community. This is where using big ocean states and Large Ocean States is part of punching above our weight and saying, okay, on some maps, you do not even see SIDS. That is how small they think of us. We are going to make sure that when the big ocean states are in the room, you are going to notice us."

Similarly, Christian Faure (2025, personal communication, 17 June), Director General of Regional Affairs in the Foreign Affairs Department of Seychelles, noted that the term is also intentionally used to emphasise the challenges of governance: 'we use terms such as large ocean or large maritime country to make the point and accentuate how difficult it is for us to manage this vast maritime territory.' Importantly, this demonstrates that there is intentionality behind adopting the label, since it is not only about a positive rebranding but also a means of drawing attention to the immense vulnerabilities of these states and the difficulties they have in managing their vast EEZs, especially in terms of illicit activities that take place in the waters. This echoes the view of Dias (2025, personal communication, 5 August), who asserts that 'mechanisms need to be put in place to protect the ocean because we remain vulnerable to so many things beyond our control'. In this sense, the LOS label, while also used to draw attention to the vast ocean space for which Seychelles requires support in management, can be interpreted as a claim to a duty of ocean stewardship. This role is critically important for Seychelles, where 'the ocean is more than just a resource; it is our lifeline, our

identity, and our legacy' (State House Seychelles 2025). Indeed, Seychelles has gone further to assert that it is 'not just a custodian of its waters but a steward of a global marine heritage' (State House Seychelles 2025). These insights illustrate that the LOS narrative functions as an intentional diplomatic framing, operating simultaneously as a tool of empowerment and as a reminder of the structural vulnerabilities associated with the management of extensive oceanic spaces.

Compatibility of LOS and SIDS

No major tensions exist between LOS and SIDS, as the terms are seen as compatible. There are two explanations for this. First, LOS is seen as being able to speak to the SIDS identity (Lawen 2025, personal communication, 30 July). One vulnerability of SIDS is their relatively undiversified economies. In the case of Seychelles, the economy is highly dependent on the ocean, both for its fisheries and for tourism. In this regard, the LOS narrative speaks directly to this, since it emphasises the large ocean space that Seychelles needs to manage. Faure (2025, personal communication, 17 June) points out that LOS is also used to 'accentuate how difficult it is for us to manage this vast zone … this vast maritime territory.' Seen in this way, LOS is an informal category that highlights both the opportunities of the ocean and the challenges it entails. This speaks to what Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) has pointed out, namely, that the LOS label is not about *emphasising* the large ocean zone but about *recognising* that Seychelles has a large ocean. Senior Programme Manager at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Jeremy Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) makes a similar assertion, suggesting that while the SIDS label is purely about vulnerability, which fails to represent the ocean (Shah 2015), the LOS/BOS label could be interpreted as having both elements: vulnerability and untapped potential.

Second, there is little conflict between SIDS and LOS because the latter is not meant to replace the former. As Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) aptly observed in an interview, 'Are we a big ocean state? Are we a small island state? We are both!' Yet not all SIDS are necessarily LOS. For example, Samoa has suggested that it sees no point in subscribing to the LOS narrative because it has nothing to gain from it. This echoes what Hume et al. (2021: 8) note: that LOS as a category does not refer to all states that have a large EEZ but rather those that have a disproportionately large EEZ compared to their land size. Therefore, within the grouping of SIDS, if LOS were to be introduced as an official category to replace SIDS, the strength of the island groupings would diminish, since fewer states would be involved. According to Jumeau (2025,

personal communication, 7 August), 'It will not help us at all to have a new group called Large Ocean States'. Another interviewee (2025, personal communication, 6 August) pointed out that 'we cannot be losing the entirety of SIDS because this showcases the vulnerabilities of SIDS and especially towards climate change and the impacts because of our isolation'. Shah (2015) asks: 'What value would it add to use the term *Large Ocean State*? [...] I think the proliferation of labels nowadays is a big problem'. Thus, it may be better to accord the LOS narrative an important advocacy role in raising awareness of the opportunities and challenges that states with large oceans, such as Seychelles, face without attempting to use the label to create a separate, official new category.

LOS as a manifestation of agency

There are at least three ways in which the Large Ocean State narrative exemplifies agency. First, it is used as a strategy to assert and reassert state sovereignty. Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) explains that the LOS label recognises both the richness and challenges of Seychelles as a state at the most basic level. While it is recognised internationally as a sovereign state, Lawen (2025, personal communication, 30 July) explains that it is often difficult to locate on maps because its landmass is so small. This contributes to a sense of cartographic and political invisibility. The LOS label is about affirming the identity, culture and 'statehood' of Seychelles.

Second, the LOS narrative is a strategic move to reaffirm Seychelles' leadership position (Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August). There has been significant interest from external actors in the potential of Seychelles' ocean (Dias 2025, personal communication, 5 August). In this sense, Seychelles needed to assert sovereignty over its ocean space. This speaks to the broader issues facing many African states, namely the tension between attracting external finance and development assistance, while still retaining control over their natural resources (Caramento, Saunders and Larmer 2023: 342). Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) observes that Seychelles occupies a pivotal position from which to project influence, a fact that is well recognised by major powers and evidenced by the presence of embassies from all five permanent members of the UNSC. Beyond geopolitics, the LOS framing also serves the very practical purpose of attracting investors, donors and potential development projects.

Third, the LOS narrative is an affirmation, demonstration and manifestation of the agency of certain SIDS. Thus, states like Seychelles are strategically using the terms LOS and SIDS interchangeably, depending on, in Jumeau's words (2025,

personal communication, 7 August), 'where we are and whichever suits us'. As Raguain et al. (2025: 207) point out, the BOS/LOS classification has the potential to complement that of SIDS, but there needs to be an understanding of 'what can be gained or lost from such designations'. A case in point is the toggling between 'Large Ocean State' and 'SIDS' in a speech by a representative of the Seychelles Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Blue Economy (2025) at UNOC 3 in 2025. The SIDS label was used to refer to Seychelles' vulnerabilities: 'like other SIDS, we are not spared the ongoing threats of climate change, overfishing, illegal and unreported and unregulated fishing, marine pollution, and biodiversity loss'. This assertion was followed by an appeal for the need to rethink funding, which suggests that SIDS is used when such states require financial support. However, in the same UN speech, Seychelles was referred to as an LOS that is 99% ocean, and striving 'to lead the way by piloting solutions for the oceans'. In addition, the idea of using blue bonds and debt for ocean swaps was broached. Therefore, despite the vulnerabilities of the SIDS label, Seychelles intentionally positions itself as a steward and leader in ocean governance.

In President Wavel Ramkalawan's (2022) keynote address at the high-level segment of the Great Blue Wall, he highlighted the LOS narrative without referring to SIDS even once. In this instance, specific mention was made of Seychelles as a leader and promoter. This indicates that the toggling of these narratives is strategic. The SIDS framing is about legitimising calls for financing and adaptation support, while the LOS narrative is about asserting authority, expertise and stewardship over the global ocean. From a practical perspective, Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) notes that the LOS/BOS label could be used for ocean-related affairs, and that of SIDS for climate negotiations.

FROM LAND-CENTRIC AFRICA TO LARGE OCEAN STATE THINKING

Underlying the narrative of LOS is a philosophy not of thinking outside the box but of thinking and acting as though the box itself does not exist (Michel 2025, personal communication, 15 August). Traditionally, assessments of a country's wealth have focused on its terrestrial resources and landmass, often resulting in narrow, land-centric policy perspectives. In Africa, the result is that policies are often 'seablind', paying little attention to oceans as a source of prosperity, while also presenting governance challenges (Walker 2015; Mandrup and Vreÿ 2015; Onyenucheya 2023; ADF 2025; Daniels 2025). In contrast, 'thinking as

though there is no box' reorients the locus of value, imagination and governance towards the ocean as an expansive opportunity, identity and source of agency. It involves rejecting the implicit constraints of conventional statehood metrics and embracing the fluidity, interconnectedness and vastness of the maritime realm as intrinsic to Seychelles' national potential. It may be argued that the same logics of extraction and exploitation that govern land can be applied to the ocean; however, as noted, Seychelles clearly emphasises stewardship and protection over resource extraction. In this sense, the LOS narrative is not primarily about legal claims or extraction but about reframing identity, responsibility and political imagination.

Jumeau (2025, personal communication, 7 August) provides a pertinent explanation of how this mental shift operates. If an islander stands at the water's edge of their island and turns their back to the ocean, the island appears small, finite, bounded and defined entirely by the visible land. This view reinforces the perception of isolation and limitation. Indeed, Raguain (2025, personal communication, 13 August) points out that 'if we keep saying we are small, then we are going to act small and think small'. However, if that same person turns to face the ocean, with their back to the island, the perception changes entirely: the island becomes vast, extending far beyond sight. From the shore, it is impossible to determine where the island's maritime domain ends or how deep it stretches. In this sense, the horizon should not be considered a constraint but a reminder of infinite possibilities, untapped resources and the boundless connectivity of the ocean space. Former Seychellois President Wavel Ramkalawan (2021) has explained that the oceans surrounding Seychelles should be recognised as 'Africa's most prized natural assets', while also noting that 'our oceans are very strategic economic assets and that could be regarded as the cornerstone of our modern-day development efforts'. In this framing, the sea is not a void that surrounds the island; it is the island's true expanse. This speaks to the seminal work of Epeli Hau'ofa (1994: 152), who stated that the idea of smallness is relative, since it depends entirely on what is included or excluded. Too often, calculations of size are based on the extent of land surfaces that can be seen (Hau'ofa 1994: 152). Thus, the case of Seychelles presents an example to other African states, especially coastal ones with vast shorelines, about the necessity of overcoming seablindness and embracing the ocean as a critical space by fundamentally rethinking how space, scale and value are imagined in African political and economic governance.

CONCLUSION

The LOS narrative provides a more holistic understanding and portrayal of states such as Seychelles. It emphasises, at once, the opportunities that come with being 99% water and the challenges of managing such a large oceanic space. This narrative is a direct assertion of agency by an island state that few would be able to locate on a map. The narrative is strategic, since it affirms Seychelles' sovereignty, draws attention to its vulnerabilities, positions it as an innovator and leader in ocean governance, and makes it attractive to international actors. By adopting this narrative, Seychelles emphasises that SIDS are not merely passive pawns but are actively involved in defining and refining their place in the global order. While the LOS narrative has not yet been institutionalised as an official UN grouping—and it may never achieve such status—its effectiveness lies less in formal recognition and more in its symbolic power. This is not to suggest that the LOS narrative automatically confers either symbolic or material power, nor that it overcomes the structural constraints associated with Seychelles' small population, limited landmass and constrained diplomatic resources. Rather, the narrative broadens the range of resources through which influence can be exercised by directing attention to the strategic, economic and political value of Seychelles' vast maritime domain. In doing so, it opens up new possibilities for thinking about how material capabilities can be derived not only from territorial size or conventional measures of power but also from the opportunities afforded by the ocean.

Given the relatively recent emergence of the LOS framing, it is too early to assess empirically the extent to which it has generated tangible diplomatic or material gains. Nevertheless, even at this nascent stage, the LOS narrative signals that Seychelles is no longer content to be represented solely through the lens of SIDS. It recasts the identity of Seychelles from one of marginality and vulnerability to that of agency, responsibility and strategic significance. More importantly, the significance of the LOS narrative extends beyond island politics. As an African state, Seychelles challenges entrenched imaginaries of African states as passive and without agency in the international arena. Simultaneously, Seychelles' embrace of the LOS identity disrupts the seablindness that has—and continues to plague—the African continent. Therefore, oceans are recast as central to African agency.

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CHAPTER NINE

RECLAIMING THE BLUE ECONOMY: SIDS, MARITIME SECURITY AND ISLAND-LED OCEAN GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

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INTRODUCTION

For Small Island Developing States (SIDS), oceans represent far more than economic opportunity—they constitute the material foundation of sovereignty, identity and survival. SIDS bear responsibility for vast ocean spaces that dwarf their terrestrial territories, with Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) often hundreds of times larger than land areas (Quirk and Hanich 2016). In the Indian Ocean, for instance, Seychelles claims an EEZ of 1.4 million square kilometres compared to a land area of just 459 square kilometres—a ratio exceeding 3000: 1 (Seychelles Trade Portal 2025). The ocean provides critical protein sources, employment through fisheries and tourism, potential revenue from seabed minerals and the littoral space through which island sovereignty is exercised and recognised in international law (Stratford et al. 2011). Yet this ocean dependency also exposes SIDS disproportionately to climate change impacts including sea-level rise, ocean acidification and extreme weather events (Nurse et al. 2014). Beyond environmental threats, SIDS face mounting maritime insecurity from illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, transnational crime, drug trafficking and piracy (Bueger 2015)—challenges compounded by limited state capacity, small populations and fragmented territories that complicate surveillance and enforcement across vast maritime domains (Okafor-Yarwood 2019). The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) emerges as a particularly strategic maritime space where competing interests, security threats and development pressures converge. This region encompasses SIDS—Comoros, Réunion

(French territory), Mauritius, Madagascar and Seychelles—alongside coastal African states including Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Somalia and South Africa (see Figure 9.1). It hosts some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, with approximately 80% of global seaborne oil trade transiting through these waters (Hafiz 2025), while supporting rich but threatened marine biodiversity and coastal communities dependent on ocean resources valued conservatively at US$333.8 billion (UNECA 2025).

The blue economy—broadly defined as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and ocean ecosystem health—is therefore not a minor policy concern for WIO island states but an existential imperative. The WIO is, however, conceptualised differently by various stakeholders according to their strategic interests (Marggraff 2025). Indo-Pacific strategies, China's Maritime Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative) and France's assertion of resident Indo-Pacific power status through its overseas territories (Réunion and Mayotte), all extend external framings across the region (Chauhdry, Aqib and Wassan 2025; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs – France 2020; Safety4sea 2025). Okafor-Yarwood and Onuoha (2023: 948) argue that this divergence in threat prioritisation reveals fundamental tensions in ocean governance, whereby external actors often prioritise their strategic interests over the needs of local communities.

In contrast, island states—acting within the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), an intergovernmental organisation—have primarily defined the WIO according to the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), focusing on threats directly affecting regional states' survival. These include: IUU fishing depleting food security; climate change eroding sovereignty; trafficking undermining governance; and environmental degradation threatening marine ecosystems (Mohabeer and Sullivan de Estrada 2019; Alexandre et al. 2026; RMIFC n.d.).

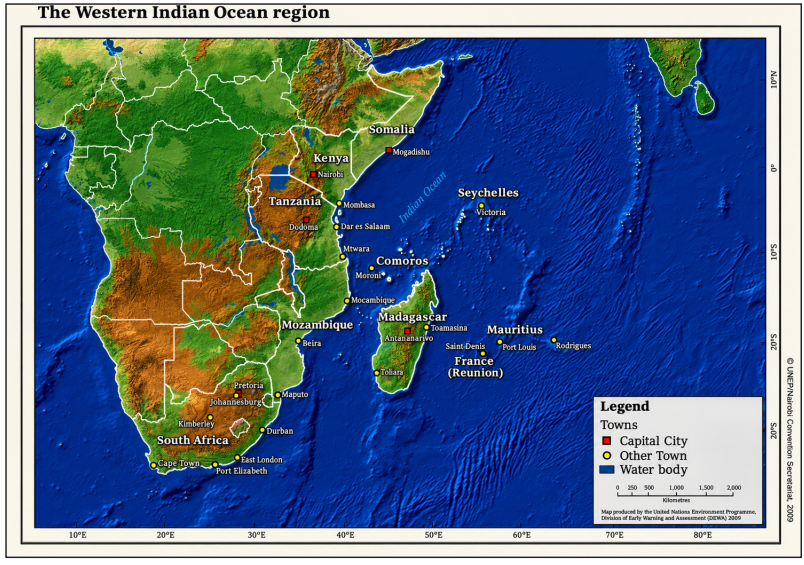

Figure 9.1: Map of the Western Indian Ocean. Source: UNEP/Nairobi Convention Secretariat (2009).

This chapter advances a central claim: SIDS do not merely adopt blue economy (BE) and ocean governance frameworks developed elsewhere; they actively shape and transform them through regional governance, producing tangible outcomes that challenge both 'seablindness' and what this chapter terms 'island blindness'. Seablindness refers to the tendency to overlook the maritime domain or treat it as peripheral to land-based politics and economic life (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). At its core is the failure to recognise the ocean as a strategic domain in its own right. 'Island blindness', by contrast, refers to the marginalisation of SIDS perspectives, agency and priorities in ocean governance despite their vast ocean territories and accumulated maritime knowledge. Building on Stratford et al.'s (2011) observation that island perspectives remain 'largely absent or silent' from dominant geographical and political frameworks, the concept captures the persistent invisibility of island actors and their knowledge systems.

The two forms of blindness are related but distinct. A state may fully understand the strategic importance of the ocean yet remain island blind, treating states as objects of external strategy rather than authors of regional governance. Indeed, this distinction speaks directly to the volume's concept of ocean regions: ocean regions are not fixed geographical spaces but are actively shaped through governance. The RMSA illustrates this process. By placing the ocean at the

centre of regional policy while positioning island and coastal states as leaders in defining and securing their shared maritime space, the RMSA challenges both seablindness and island blindness.

Using the IOC as its primary case study, this chapter examines how SIDS have developed a distinct regional approach to BE. Established in 1984 by five WIO island states—Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (France) and Seychelles—to foster regional cooperation among French-speaking islands bound by shared language, geography and development challenges, the IOC provides an important example of SIDS-led ocean governance. This chapter addresses four core questions: How is BE conceptualised in African and Indian Ocean SIDS in comparison with global frameworks? How does the IOC operationalise a SIDS-driven BE approach? What role does maritime security play in enabling sustainable ocean-based development? And what lessons does the IOC case offer for broader ocean governance, particularly regarding competing conceptualisations of ocean space and threat prioritisation? The analysis draws on IOC policy documents, regional strategies and institutional frameworks, while incorporating insights from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to highlight both the commonalities and differences in SIDS regional governance approaches.

THE BLUE ECONOMY: ORIGINS, GLOBAL FRAMINGS AND AFRICAN RECONFIGURATIONS

Origins and Global North architecture

The BE concept did not emerge in isolation. It builds on the green economy framework that gained prominence at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, extending its sustainability and market-based principles to the ocean (Picken 2025). The concept entered mainstream global policy discourse at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, where its conceptual foundations were largely shaped by Global North institutions, including the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations (UN) agencies, whose definitions continue to influence international debate. Most definitions converge around the sustainable use of ocean resources to promote economic growth, livelihoods and healthy marine ecosystems (World Bank and UN DESA 2017). However, they differ in emphasis. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) prioritise food security and sustainable fisheries, while UN Environment Programme (UNEP) focuses on ecosystem-based management and environment

sustainability (UNEP and WIOMSA 2015). By contrast, the World Bank and the OECD place greater emphasis on economic growth, maritime industries, innovation and investment (OECD 2016).

These growth-oriented framings has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to distributional questions. That is, questions have been raised about who benefits from ocean resources and how coastal communities participate in blue economies constructed around them (Barbesgaard 2017). For African coastal and island states, these concerns are particularly significant, given the long history of external extraction of marine resources with limited local benefits. These ideas were further institutionalised through the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 on 'Life Below Water,' the 2017 UN Ocean Conference and other subsequent global ocean initiatives (United Nations 2017; Cisneros-Montemayor et al. 2021). However, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in developing countries with limited technical and financial capacity (Bennett et al. 2019).

As a result, tensions between economic, environmental protection and social equity remain unresolved. Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), for example, often championed by international conservation organisations, may restrict traditional fishing grounds and livelihoods without meaningful consultations (Bennett et al. 2021). Meanwhile, private sector involvement raises concerns about the commodification of ocean spaces and the exclusion of small-scale operators (Childs and Hicks 2019). The European Union's BE strategy, for instance, exemplifies a growth-oriented, technologically optimistic approach centred on maritime clusters, innovation and marine biotechnology (European Commission 2021). In the WIO, the European Union (EU) is a long-term partner supporting various programmes, reflecting its strategic interest in promoting regional stability, securing sustainable access to marine resources and strengthening trade and geopolitical ties. The table below details the EU's supporting programmes in the maritime security and sustainable fisheries sectors in the WIO. However, critics have identified three recurring limitations in dominant BE models: their technocratic bias, which favours expert-led solutions; their securitisation of maritime challenges through external strategic priorities; and their limited local ownership, with external actors often defining both problems and solutions (Silver et al. 2015; Barbesgaard 2017). These concerns are particularly relevant for SIDS, where capacity constraints and power asymmetries can reinforce external agenda-setting at the expense of island priorities.

Table 9.1: EU support in the WIO. Source: European Union External Action (EEAS) 2024; EEAS 2025; European Commission/Service for Foreign Policy Instruments 2025; EEAS 2022; IOC 2025; Ministry of Homeland Security and Civil Affairs (Seychelles) 2025.

Programme	Geographic Scope	Lead/ Implementing Body	Main Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Maritime Security Programme (MASE) (Ended in 2023)	Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA); WIO regions	IOC, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)	Strengthen regional maritime security architecture and cooperation	Counter-piracy, antitrafficking, information sharing, regional coordination
Safe Seas Africa (SSA) (Launched in 2025)	ESA; WIO	IOC, International Maritime Organisation (IMO), The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	Consolidate and sustain maritime security architecture established under MASE	Maritime governance, legal frameworks, operational coordination
Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) (Launched in 2015)	Indo-Pacific	EU, implemented by Expertise France	Enhance maritime situational awareness and information sharing	Maritime domain awareness, IORIS platform, regional cooperation
EU Capacity Building Mission in Somalia—EUCAP) Somalia (Launched in 2012)	Somalia	EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) Mission	Strengthen Somali maritime security and law enforcement institutions	Coast guard capacity, rule of law, maritime policing

Programme	Geographic Scope	Lead/ Implementing Body	Main Objectives	Key Focus Areas
Port Security and Safety of Navigation Programme (Launched in 2020)	WIO and ESA	IOC, UNODC, IMO	Improve port security, maritime safety and compliance with international standards	Port security, safety of navigation, capacity-building
ECOFISH Programme (Ended 2025)	Western Indian Ocean	EU, IOC	Promote sustainable fisheries management and governance	Fisheries monitoring, small-scale fisheries, IUU fishing
Regional Plan for Fisheries Surveillance (PRSP)/ Sustainable Western Indian Ocean Programme (SWIOP) Fisheries Project (Launched in 2025)	South-West Indian Ocean	EU, IOC member States, FAO, regional fisheries bodies	Strengthen fisheries governance and sustainability	Fisheries surveillance, stock management, livelihoods

African and continental reframings

African scholarship and institutions have responded by reframing the BE in three complementary ways. The first way is as a driver of economic transformation, promoting poverty reduction, employment and diversification beyond land-based resources (Thoya et al. 2022). This is in line with the African Union's vision of the BE as 'Africa's new frontier' (AU 2014). The second way is as a question of environmental justice, highlighting the need to balance conservation with the rights and livelihoods of coastal communities, particularly where MPAs restrict traditional fishing and risk 'ocean grabbing' (Sowman and Sunde 2018; Barbesgaard 2017). The third way is as a maritime security agenda, recognising that sustainable ocean development depends on addressing IUU fishing, piracy and trafficking (Bueger 2015; Kamal-Deen 2015).

The integrated approach is reflected in the 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIM Strategy), which explicitly links maritime security to economic development (AU 2014). Subsequent frameworks, including the African Union's Africa Blue Economy Strategy (2020) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa's (UNECA) Blue Economy Policy Handbook for Africa (2016), have encouraged the development of regional and national BE strategies. As a result, organisations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have already adopted BE strategies, while the East African Community (EAC), COMESA and the Indian Ocean Rim Association are still developing theirs (March et al. 2024; IGAD 2023). Implementation, however, remains uneven. While all ten WIO states have expressed intent and seven have adopted strategies, only Seychelles has both action plans and the integration of BE priorities within national policy. The reasons behind these constraints are often due to financing gaps, capacity constraints and coordination challenges between overlapping regional initiatives.

Gaps in the literature and a SIDS-centred reframing

Despite this growing body of work, important gaps remain. SIDS are still more often portrayed as vulnerable recipients of external pressures than as active shapers of ocean governance (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). Likewise, island-led organisations such as the IOC have received limited scholarly attention despite their role in developing regional governance frameworks[56]. In particular, the security-development nexus is also under-theorised. While many studies recognise the connection, few explain how these objectives can be reconciled or whose priorities they ultimately serve. This gap is particularly evident when compared to the Pacific region. Concepts such as Epeli Hau'ofa's 'Oceania' and the PIF's 'Blue Pacific Continent' have reframed island states as ocean powers rather than small and vulnerable territories (Hau'ofa 1994; Pacific Island Forum 2022). Comparable conceptualisations for African and Indian Ocean SIDS remain limited, obscuring how island agency shapes regional governance. This chapter addresses these gaps by framing the BE through a SIDS perspective. It advances three propositions. First, the blue economy is a project of sovereignty: without the capacity to monitor and protect maritime spaces, sovereign rights remain largely nominal (Quirk and Hanich 2016). Second, maritime security is not separate from development but a precondition for sustainable ocean governance. This points towards the security-development nexus (Bueger 2015).

[56] As an exception, see Marggraff (2024).

Third, effective BE governance must be place-based, reflecting the distinct political economies and priorities of island states rather than applying universal models (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Walsh 2025).

THE INDIAN OCEAN COMMISSION AS A CASE STUDY

Established in 1982 and formalised through the Victoria Agreement in 1984, the IOC is Africa's only island-led intergovernmental organisation, representing a distinctive model of regional cooperation. Its membership—Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and France through Réunion—represents around 33 million people and 5.5 million square kilometres of EEZs (IOC 2025). Founded during a period of post-colonial state-building and Cold War competition, the IOC has evolved from a modest cooperation platform into a multi-sectoral regional organisation. The revised Victoria Agreement, which elevated the Summit of Heads of State and Government to a statutory body, marked an important step in its institutional evolution (IOC 2023b). Its growing international relevance is reflected in the admission of eight observers—including China, the EU, the International Organisation of the Francophonie, the Order of Malta, India, Japan, the UN and South Korea (IOC 2025).

The IOC operates as a coordinator and convenor rather than a supranational authority. Through its Council of Ministers, Committee of Permanent Liaison Officers and General Secretariat in Mauritius, it enables collective action while preserving member states' sovereignty (IOC 2025). Over four decades, the IOC has mobilised around €300 million in external support while deliberately diversifying its partnerships beyond its long-standing relationship with the EU. This strategy has strengthened the organisation's strategic autonomy and reinforced its ability to shape, rather than simply implement, regional priorities (IOC 2025).

Regionally, the IOC rests on the principle of subsidiarity, advancing the idea that ocean regions can have fluid boundaries that expand functional cooperation beyond fixed membership, while respecting the organisation's island-centred identity (IOC 2023a). This approach is reflected in the RMSA, whose two operational centres—the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles—connect IOC members with neighbouring coastal states and wider regional partners. The RMSA therefore extends cooperation beyond IOC membership while maintaining regional ownership of maritime security governance (Kinyua 2023; DCoC and IOC 2022).

Beyond maritime security, the IOC has developed recognised expertise in the BE, fisheries, biodiversity conservation and climate resilience, positioning itself as a regional agenda-setter rather than a passive implementing agency (IOC-Blue Economy 2021; IOC 2025). Its growing diplomatic role is equally evident internationally. After chairing the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) from 2018 to 2020, the IOC has continued as secretariat following its transition to the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA). Combined with its participation in forums such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE)—cochaired by the European Union Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR-Operation Atalanta) and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the UN Security Council—this has enabled the IOC to promote African island and coastal state priorities while broadening international maritime security debates beyond piracy to include fisheries, climate and wider maritime crimes (IOC-CGPCS 2020; Alexandre 2025).

Finally, clarifying the IOC's institutional role helps frame its contribution. The IOC is neither a military alliance nor an operational security actor: it has no armed forces and conducts no military operations. Nor is it simply a donor-funded project implementer. Although external funding is essential, the IOC exercises strategic and diplomatic agency by shaping regional priorities, negotiating partnerships and guiding programme design (IOC n.d.a). Unlike regional economic communities such as COMESA or the EAC, the IOC has a broader mandate encompassing maritime security, environmental protection, climate and food security and public health. Its role is to foster collective action among its member states on shared regional challenges while respecting national sovereignty (Koigi 2024).

THE IOC IN PRACTICE: OPERATIONALISING A SIDS-DRIVEN BLUE ECONOMY

The IOC operationalises its SIDS-driven BE approach across multiple interconnected priorities: climate change, maritime security, marine environment governance and regional economic development. What distinguishes this approach is not any single programme but the deliberate integration of these domains into a coherent governance architecture that reflects island priorities rather than externally imposed frameworks. These programmes are mapped below.

The Regional Maritime Security Architecture as an institutional cornerstone

The RMSA is the IOC's most significant institutional innovation (see Figure 9.2). Established through two regional agreements on maritime information exchange and joint operations at sea and signed in 2018 by Comoros, Djibouti, France (Réunion), Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles (IOC-RMIFC 2023; Parliament of Kenya 2019), the RMSA addresses the full spectrum of maritime threats, moving beyond the narrow counter-piracy focus that has long characterised external interventions. Its mandate encompasses IUU fishing, trafficking, marine pollution, environmental crime and climate-related risks (IOC Secretary-General Marimoutou, quoted in EEAS 2021).

Initially supported through the EU-funded MASE programme and now consolidated under the SSA programme, the RMSA is built around two complementary regional centres (GovMU 2025). The RMIFC in Madagascar generates real-time maritime domain awareness by integrating satellite, vessel-tracking and partner information (Alexandre et al. 2026; Mohabeer and Micheni 2025). The RCOC in Seychelles co-ordinates national and partner assets to support joint operations at sea. This includes, for example, Operation Levante 2 held in 2024 and involving Kenya, Madagascar, the United Kingdom and EUNAVFOR-Operation Atalanta (IOC 2024; Seychelles News Agency 2024). As of January 2026, member states had committed 43 surface and air assets and conducted more than 42 joint operations at sea.

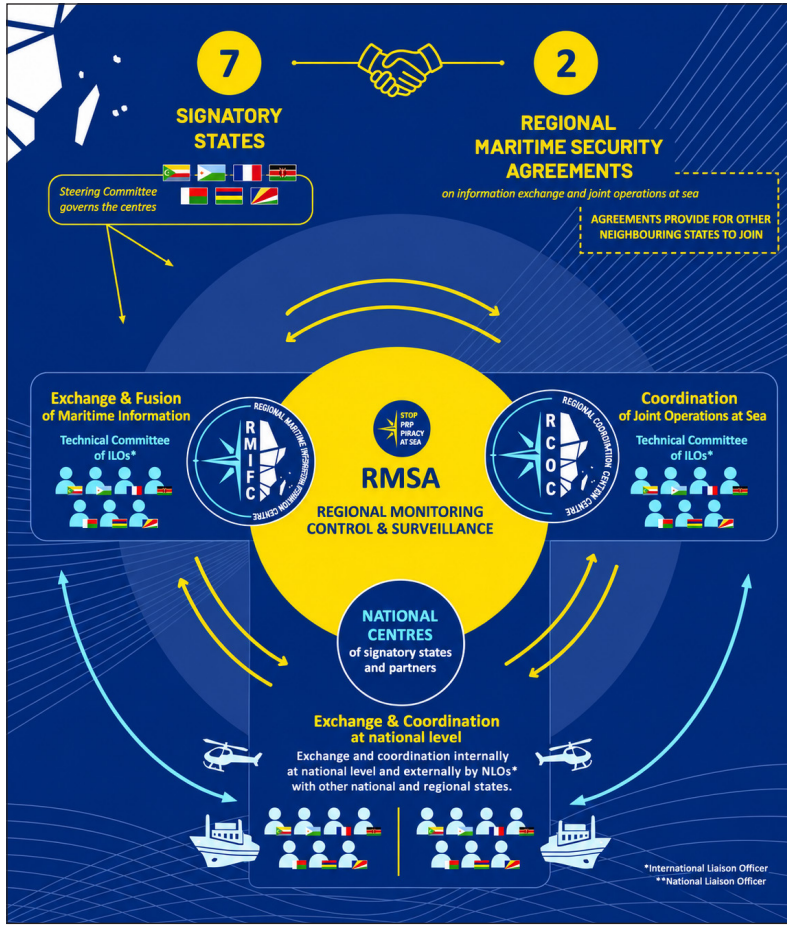

Figure 9.2: Overview of the roles of the RMIFC and RCOC within the Architecture. Source: Alexandre et al. (2026).

Rather than transferring sovereignty to a regional institution, the RMSA enables collective sovereignty: states retain authority over their EEZs while voluntarily pooling information, expertise and operational capabilities that would be difficult to sustain individually (Quirk and Hanich 2016). Through partnerships with EUNAVFOR, the CMF, the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment (DCoC-JA), the RMSA has become a recognised pillar of regional maritime governance in the WIO region (Khan 2025; DCoC and IOC 2022; CMF 2025).

Climate change adaptation and resilience

Climate adaptation forms a second pillar of the IOC's SIDS-centred approach, reflecting island states' particular exposure to sea-level rise, extreme weather and ocean acidification (Nurse et al. 2014). Over a period of twenty years, more than 50 catastrophic events have caused US$17 billion in damage across the region, underscoring adaptation as an economic imperative (IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2016). The ACCLIMATE project, launched in 2008, provided the region's first comprehensive assessment of climate vulnerabilities across sectors including, food security, fresh water, biodiversity and sovereignty (WeADAPT 2012; IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2012). This work informed the IOC's Regional Adaptation Strategy (2016-2020), supporting implementation of member states' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (IOC 2023b; IISD SDG Knowledge Hub 2016). Accreditation as a Regional Direct Access Entity to the Green Climate Fund has strengthened regional ownership of climate finance (Green Climate Fund 2024). Through the Climate Resilient Islands Partnership, co-ordinated with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Caribbean Community Climate Change centre (CCCCC), the IOC also promotes South-South cooperation on climate planning, finance and knowledge sharing (UN SDG Partnerships n.d.). This demonstrates how island regions generate solutions collectively rather than relying solely on externally designed programmes (UNFCCC n.d.).

Marine environment governance

The IOC has also developed an integrated portfolio linking environmental protection with sustainable development initiatives. These programmes span marine pollution, waste management, coastal restoration, fisheries governance and climate adaptation. The initiatives combine scientific research, regulatory reform, community-based conservation, improved fisheries monitoring and climate services to strengthen sustainable development across the WIO. Collectively, they illustrate the IOC's integrated approach to regional ocean governance. Key projects include:

Table 9.2: Key Projects in the WIO. Source: FFEM n.d.; GEF 2021; IOC n.d.; IOC 2021; IOC-Hydromet 2021; IOC-Zenodo 2023, IOC-ECOFISH 2025; OACPS n.d.; UNDP 2024, World Bank n.d.

Policy Area	Key Projects	Primary Focus	Additional Notes
Marine pollution and circular economy	*Expédition Plastique Océan Indien* **(ExPLOI)** Transformation of the Waste Sector towards a Waste-Energy Nexus **(TWENex)**	Marine pollution, circular economy, waste management	Specifically adapted to island contexts. TWENex was closed in 2025
Chemical and waste management	Implementing Sustainable Low and Non-Chemical Development in Small Island Developing States **(ISLANDS)**—Indian Ocean	Regulatory reform, private-sector engagement, regional knowledge sharing	Funded by the Global Environment Fund co-implemented with Business Mauritius
Integrated Coastal Zone Management	Resilience of Coastal Ecosystems in the Southwest of the Indian Ocean **(RECOS)**	Ecosystem restoration, community-based conservation	Operates in Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM). The RECOS builds on the Regional Coastal Management Programme (ReCoMaP)
Fisheries Governance	*Programme Régional de Surveillance des Pêches* **(PRSP)**	Monitoring, control and surveillance; institutional capacity, regional cooperation	Supported through successive EU funded programmes—ECOFISH; SMARTFISH; SWIOFISH

Policy Area	Key Projects	Primary Focus	Additional Notes
Climate adaptation	Hydromet	Hydro-meteorological services, climate information, resilience	Supported by the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD), the EU, and ClimSA

Power, agency and regional solidarity

Underlying these initiatives is the IOC's ability to convert regional solidarity into political leverage. Individually, island states have limited bargaining power with major donors and external powers. Collectively, however, they co-ordinate negotiating positions, shape regional priorities and reduce dependence on any single partner. The IOC has mobilised approximately €300 million from a diversified group of partners while maintaining strategic autonomy in programme design (IOC 2025). This strategy mirrors the PIF's collective diplomacy on climate change and fisheries (Fry 2019). By attracting multiple external partners—including competing global powers—the IOC shifts the balance of engagement: external actors increasingly compete to work with the IOC rather than the organisation having to compete for attention. At the same time, growing geopolitical interest in the WIO makes continued regional cohesion essential if island priorities are to remain at the centre of governance.

The IOC experience supports this chapter's central argument that maritime security is not a separate policy domain but a prerequisite for sustainable ocean development. Through the RMSA, maritime domain awareness has significantly improved the region's ability to detect and respond to IUU fishing, trafficking, pollution and other maritime threats (Ralaiarivony 2025). The two regional centres, working with the Nairobi Convention Secretariat and international partners, have strengthened regional preparedness and interoperability through co-ordinated pollution response exercises, including the Maritime Security and Pollution Response Exercise held in 2023 (MASEPOLREX23) and in 2025 (MASEPOLREX25). These exercises have also reduced institutional duplication by improving coordination across regional actors (IOC-MASEPOLREX25 2025; Témoignages 2023; Nairobi Convention 2025). These outcomes are now internationally recognised. For example, the United States Navy has formally integrated the RCOC into the planning of their annual regional exercises through CUTLASS Express, thereby publicly acknowledging its central role in coordinating regional responses and enhancing interoperability (Gontier 2025; PMAESA 2025; Levardi 2024). The development implications are

equally significant. UNECA estimates that maritime security issues cost the WIO more than US$1.14 billion annually—around 5.7% of the region's gross marine product (UNECA 2025). Between 2020 and 2025, the IOC managed approximately €130 million across fourteen projects linking maritime security with sustainable development (IOC 2023b).

Regional cooperation has also created the conditions for innovation. The UNECA Blue Economy Valuation Toolkit (BEVTK) highlights the importance of ocean-based sectors in SIDS: in Seychelles the BE underpins key revenue-generating sectors, while in Zanzibar it contributes over a quarter of GDP (UNECA SRO-EA 2021; Maskaeva et al. 2024). For smaller economies such as Comoros, regional security arrangements provide access to surveillance data, technical expertise and operational coordination that would otherwise be beyond national capacity. Seychelles' pioneering US$15 million sovereign Blue Bond for marine conservation and fisheries management illustrates how security-enabled governance can support financial innovation (World Bank 2025). While nationally issued, it benefited from IOC-facilitated technical cooperation and knowledge sharing, creating a model that other island and coastal states can adapt (Virdin et al. 2021).

WHAT LESSONS DOES THE IOC CASE OFFER FOR BROADER OCEAN GOVERNANCE?

The IOC case generates valuable lessons, illustrating how SIDS can exercise epistemic authority over the ocean futures and contribute to reshaping global ocean governance frameworks. In bridging the gap between vulnerability and agency, the IOC demonstrates how regional institutions enable collective sovereignty, facilitate knowledge production and create platforms for negotiating with powerful external partners on more equitable terms. When the IOC and UNECA jointly released the 2025 report quantifying maritime security costs according to SIDS-defined priorities—documenting that IUU fishing, climate impacts and environmental degradation impose greater economic costs than piracy—it challenged external threat prioritisation and provided evidence for reallocating resources toward island concerns (UNECA 2025). In the same vein, the coproduction and launch of the policy brief on the RMSA with the University of Oxford exemplifies how sustained research-practice collaboration can strengthen the regional knowledge base (Alexandre et al. 2026). This SIDS-led knowledge production establishes regional ownership of the problem definition, a critical precondition for ownership of the solution.

For the IOC, flexibility as an adaptation tool has proven effective in fostering regional cooperation. The IOC illustrates that ocean regions need not be defined by fixed boundaries but can instead remain fluid, shaped by functional cooperation needs. While formal IOC membership is limited to five island states, the RMSA extends its operational reach across East African coastal states and Red Sea littorals, engaging non-member states without requiring formal expansion and coordinating with continental institutions while preserving an island-specific identity (Kinyua 2023). This flexibility allows the region to be reconfigured in response to evolving challenges rather than constrained by rigid institutional frameworks. As such, it reflects a form of adaptive governance suited to complex transboundary maritime contexts, requiring cooperation across multiple scales and actor types (Mahon and Fanning 2019).

As argued at the outset, this case illustrates that ocean regions are not simply given—they are shaped by those who define them. The WIO is often viewed through external lenses: as part of the Indo-Pacific, a corridor on the Maritime Silk Road, or an area of French strategic influence. In these narratives, island states often appear as strategic locations rather than political actors. Through the RMSA and its vision of *Indianocéanie,* the IOC offers an alternative regional narrative—one shaped by island priorities, regional ownership and shared security. In doing so, it challenges island blindness by placing island states at the centre of regional governance.

The experience of the PIF demonstrates both the potential and the challenges of SIDS-led ocean governance. Like the IOC's vision of *Indianocéanie*, the PIF has redefined regional identity through the concept of the 'Blue Pacific Continent' and successfully championed SDG 14 as a standalone ocean goal (Pacific Islands Forum 2022; Quirk and Hanich 2016). The WIO, however, is shaped by a more contested strategic landscape. Competing visions promoted through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), France's Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Maritime Silk Road largely reflect external priorities, often with limited SIDS influence (Chauhdry, Aqib and Wassan 2025). In this context, the RMSA remains the only comprehensive regional framework designed and led by African island and coastal states, making it essential for preserving regional agency.

The entry into force of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement in January 2026 marks a significant achievement for SIDS in global ocean governance. SIDS played a central role in securing provisions for biodiversity protection, equitable benefit-sharing of marine genetic resources and capacity-building, while advancing the interests of 'adjacent states' affected

by high seas activities (Raguain, Eck and Pouponneau 2025). Early ratification by Mauritius, Seychelles, Palau and the Maldives reflects the treaty's importance for SIDS (Newsroom Panama 2025; Commonwealth Secretariat 2026). For regional institutions like the IOC, the BBNJ creates new opportunities to co-ordinate positions, strengthen technical cooperation and support equitable governance of adjacent high seas areas, highlighting the value of SIDS coordination across regional, inter-regional and global levels (Etuk Johnson 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

African and Indian Ocean SIDS are actively reshaping the BE through regional governance, with the IOC serving as the primary vehicle for island-led agenda setting. Rather than adopting externally designed frameworks, islands and coastal states have used regional cooperation to define institutions and strategies grounded in their own priorities—producing measurable outcomes that challenge both seablindness and island blindness in ocean governance. Through the RMSA, the IOC has positioned maritime security not as an end in itself but as an enabler of sustainable ocean governance. The IOC contributes to strengthening fisheries management through programmes and mechanisms such as Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries Governance and Shared Growth (SWIOFISH) and the Regional Fisheries Monitoring Plan (PRSP). It advances marine conservation and climate resilience through coastal and ocean management initiatives, and promotes pollution reduction and circular economy strategies. Furthermore, its approach also redefines regional threat priorities by placing IUU fishing, environmental degradation, climate impacts and sovereignty alongside traditional security concerns, while building flexible partnership that connect island states, African states and external actors. The BBNJ Agreement further empowers islands to participate in high seas management, securing marine conservation, equitable benefit-sharing and capacity-building in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

These achievements speak directly to the volume's central proposition that ocean regions are not fixed geographical spaces but are continually shaped through governance, institutions and political agency. While external actors continue to frame the WIO through various strategic narratives, the RMSA, supported by the IOC, represents a region defined from within—through the priorities, institutions and cooperation of the states that inhabit it. Comparison with the PIF highlights a shared ambition to position islands as custodians of vast maritime spaces, while also illustrating the more complex geopolitical environment in which the WIO operates. In this context, the RMSA remains the

only comprehensive maritime governance framework conceived and led by the region's island and coastal states, making its continued consolidation essential to foster regional agency. What these collective achievements also reveal, however, is that regional innovation and national implementation do not necessarily progress at the same pace. While the WIO has established one of the developing world's most advanced regional maritime security architectures, national implementation of BE strategies remains uneven. Bridging this gap represents the next frontier of SIDS-led ocean governance and will require stronger national institutions, greater policy coherence and sustained political commitment (March et al. 2024).

Several implications follow. SIDS should continue strengthening regional ownership of the BE governance agenda while embedding regional commitments more systematically into national policies and institutions and treating maritime security as a development infrastructure rather than a separate domain. African continental organisations should further integrate island perspectives into maritime governance and BE strategies, respect subsidiarity and ensure coastal and island priorities receive equal recognition. International partners should move beyond fragmented project-based support toward long-term institutional partnerships that reinforce leadership and respect locally defined priorities. The experience of the IOC demonstrates that when island and coastal states collectively shape the governance of their shared maritime space, they do more than strengthen maritime security—they shape the governance of the ocean region itself. In doing so, they offer a compelling and replicable model of ocean regionalism that challenges both seablindness and island blindness while demonstrating how regional governance can advance security, sustainable development and political agency simultaneously.

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CHAPTER TEN

THE UNTAPPED MARITIME POTENTIAL OF BRICS+: A TIME FOR STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT

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INTRODUCTION

By 2026, all ten BRICS+[57] members (bar Ethiopia) are littoral states that belong to the Global South and pursue national maritime interests. BRICS+ national maritime interests are vested in their maritime zones, with the wider maritime commons linking BRICS+ members along the oft noted 'road that goes everywhere'. As of 2026, official or emergent debates surrounding maritime interests within BRICS+ remain marginal, except for the 2018 Johannesburg Declaration (BRICS 2018: 5) and the establishment of the Polar Science and Technology Working Group (PSTWG), which aspires to foster ocean and polar research cooperation (BRICS 2015: 1). Beyond these two indicators, one must string together anecdotal indicators and views on, or references to, maritime themes and related matters (Mudemeli 2023). The explicit 2018 declaration and the establishment of PSTWG feature alongside a second matter that increasingly characterises BRICS+ declarations—that of a growing security focus, which now encompasses maritime matters (Bratersky and Kutyrev 2019: 587).

BRICS+ harbours several regional coastal powers. Member and partner countries[58] comprise eighteen states, of which fourteen are coastal states dispersed over three continents but connected by the oceans. Their littoral locations derive value from their roles in enabling or denying unhindered maritime trade and

[57] Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Russia, India, Indonesia, PR China, South Africa, United Arab Emirates.

[58] Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Vietnam. (Littoral countries in bold).

access to the oceans. In contrast, maritime trade, its industry domains and security ambit remain opaque within the rising security schema of BRICS+ (Panova 2015: 95). This chapter argues that while BRICS+ possesses significant latent maritime power, its failure to institutionalise a collective maritime agenda reflects both internal fragmentation and a persistent form of bloc seablindness. Given the vagueness of official statements, literature and programmes on maritime affairs within BRICS, this discussion seeks to frame maritime issues and assess their relevance by drawing on BRICS statements, geographic considerations, the limited existing scholarship on BRICS maritime matters and selected naval matters.

WHY DO COUNTRIES JOIN THE BRICS GROUPING?

A common stance on peaceful coexistence in its different formats, expressed in declaratory statements of annual BRICS fora and generally supported by its members, is probably a solidarity attraction. This appeal reflects ambition and solidarity, given the growing membership of the Global South and the interest the BRICS banner attracts. A more nuanced outlook sprouts from status-seeking behaviour underpinned by ambitions for self-esteem, reputation, honour, dignity, fame and sympathy. Wohlforth et al. (2018: 527) categorise such behaviour as positional (compared to other actors), perceptual (thoughts about the self and others) and social (wider collective beliefs about one's standing versus those of others). It is the latter collective view of standing that often drives states to seek a higher status in the global system. States seeking to improve their status in the system may employ several strategies. They may adopt mobility strategies (not only by means of war and conflict) to compete with a dominant group, to achieve ascendance in a different domain by employing a creativity strategy, or to use a combination of both (Konyshev and Sergunin 2022: 105—107, 109). This behaviour is open to small states as well given the increasing number of small states seeking or holding membership of BRICS+ as a mobility strategy to increase their standing or perceptions thereof in the system of states (Wohlforth et al. 2018: 527). Ultimately, each member or partner has an agenda that may or may not align fully with BRICS+ objectives, those of other members or future members.

BRICS+ countries typically strive to enhance their international status and influence while simultaneously pursuing their own national agendas. The interplay between bloc and national ambitions has become visible in the themes of the annual heads of state meetings since 2009 (BRICS Joint Information Portal

n.d.). The annual themes tend to be overly broad to capture the gist of inclusive ambitions and cooperation that the founding and new members attempt to embrace, co-operate with and benefit from. Simultaneously, this allows the host country to integrate its own agendas into the annual meeting themes and declarations, as South Africa did by calling for extensive maritime cooperation in 2018.

The aims, objectives and visions of BRICS mostly stem from pre-2024 declarations, which will likely guide BRICS+ and its growing membership for the immediate future (BRICS 2024a). From these past declarations, one can infer positions of maritime relevance, even if an explicit nexus is not visible. Some of these themes or objectives are discussed hereafter.

Multipolarity and Global South agency

BRICS+ reflects a broader drive toward multipolar international relations and the formation of new alliances within the Global South. As BRICS+ expands to include more partner countries, it creates additional/alternative platforms for Southern voices to shape global governance in ways that better reflect Southern priorities. This reform-oriented agenda helps explain why BRICS+ has attracted states seeking to reshape the international political and economic order (Garcia-Herrero 2024: 5-9). Inherently, BRICS+ agendas ought to be shaped in ways that account for the bloc's maritime potential on matters such as cooperation, more consensual voices, pact-building and influence. Within the BRICS+ grouping, pathways exist for governments and regions from the global south to influence future ocean debates, shape ongoing deliberations on ocean matters and shift maritime security provision towards better cooperation for mutual benefit.

Economic and strategic weight

The accession of five new countries since 2024 has enhanced the economic and strategic reach of the BRICS+ group. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), for instance, is a player in the global oil market and in the Persian Gulf. Egypt, Indonesia (joining in 2025) and Iran dominate strategic geopolitical maritime locations, and Ethiopia houses one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa (Panchia 2024). Indonesia's economy is the largest in Southeast Asia and is highly diversified, with a strong technology sector (International Trade Administration 2025). Their collective economic weight, important geopolitical locations, prominence in the oil market and role in housing future labour and consumer markets underline the need for secure maritime connectivity. However, a

dependence on maritime flows stands in contrast to the muted emphasis of BRICS+ on maritime cooperation, trade, ocean debates and the maritime security governance arrangements necessary for the safe and sustainable use of the oceans (Ocean Regions Programme 2023).

Population and coastal factors

BRICS+ nations are home to a considerable share of the world's population and offer markets for trade and investment within the BRICS framework. Approximately 45% of the global population resides in BRICS+. Indonesia's accession in 2025 further increased this share by bringing Southeast Asia's largest population into BRICS+, while partner countries such as Nigeria (no. 1) and Egypt (no. 3), house two of Africa's largest populations. These populations live on or close to the coast, making them both users and beneficiaries of the oceans. The population-land-sea connection serves as a catalyst for BRICS+ to link their declared ambitions for solidarity, cooperation, development and prosperity for populous Southern societies with ocean agendas as new frontiers for the economy, the environment, justice and security, as outlined by Bueger and Mallin (2023: 1720).

Strategic influence and maritime chokepoints

Except for Ethiopia, each post-2023 BRICS+ member exerts regional influence through maritime access. For example, the UAE borders the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and Egypt controls the Suez Canal, both critical maritime chokepoints. Because it serves as headquarters for the African Union, Ethiopia is the diplomatic hub of Africa, housing about 97 diplomatic missions (Embassies n.d.). Iran is an important Middle Eastern political player that dominates the critical Strait of Hormuz (Informa Law 2024: 45) which controls global oil flows from the Persian Gulf through the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

Unfortunately, at the same time, Iran has been associated with regional maritime instability, including shipping disruption in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, as well as indirect involvement via its Houthi proxy in attacks in the Red Sea and north-western Indian Ocean since December 2023 (Alasrar 2024). In February 2026, Iran's role in the Middle East, along with the importance of the Strait of Hormuz, was highlighted following the joint Israel and US attacks on Iran that destroyed several Iranian naval vessels. Iran retaliated by bombing targets in the UAE, a BRICS member, which severely disrupted shipping flows through the Strait (Shen and Meade 2026). This demonstrates how Iran misuses

its maritime position, to the detriment of other BRICS+ members, by disrupting and even attacking shipping flows through the Strait.

As an archipelago state, Indonesia possesses the largest maritime territory of all BRICS+ members (Informa Law 2024: 50-51). It straddles the Straits of Malacca, dominating the global shipping corridor between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The aforementioned points highlight the strategic maritime locations of new BRICS+ members, thereby strengthening the relevance of the oceans as a flow and stock resource for the bloc. Simultaneously, Iran's 2026 actions also expose the tenuous nature of intra-BRICS+ solidarity. National interests linked to maritime influence override bloc solidarity, as demonstrated by Iran leveraging maritime choke-point politics to the detriment of other BRICS member states.

BRICS+ AS A MARITIME ENTITY

The seas harbour a common physical connection between BRICS+ countries and the rest of the globe. As a geographically dispersed grouping with a dominant economic-developmental agenda through cooperation and partnerships, oceanic resource and connectivity/flow features hold strategic significance. Unfortunately, little BRICS+ 'maritime work' takes place, despite a comprehensive 2010 delimitation of the maritime potential of the group (then still known as BRIC) (de Vivero and Mateos 2010: 976). Although each BRICS+ member has its own national maritime security interests, the bloc's agendas can align these interests within a collaborative framework across their different working groups.

Serving common interests through collaboration offers stepping stones for a maritime agenda, while vital national interests understandably remain in the national ambit. It is, however, ambitious to expect that all maritime interests of member states can be collated under one maritime umbrella and programmes for execution. Yet ignoring their maritime capacity remains a serious void given the latent maritime potential stemming from coastal length and bi- or multi-coastal status, as depicted in Table 10.1.[59] Together with location on the straits and trade routes, these features serve as catalysts for BRICS+ to advance a maritime agenda.

[59] Some geographical features such as straits, bi- and multi-coastal features added. Lengths of coastlines available at: Coastline Lengths/Countries of the World (citypopulation.de) (Accessed 20 March 2024); Lloyd's Maritime Atlas of World Ports and Shipping Lanes, 2024, pp 16-19).

Table 10.1: Coastal features of BRICS+ Countries[60]. Source: Compiled by the author.

Member state	Coastal length km	Dominating maritime straits	Mono, bi- or multi-coastal	Ocean connections
Brazil	7 491	No	Mono	Southern Atlantic
China	14 500	Yes Taiwan Strait	Mono	Western Pacific
India	7 000	No	Bi	Arabian Sea Indian Ocean
Iran	2 440	Yes Strait of Hormuz	Multi	Persian Gulf Gulf of Oman Caspian Sea
Russia	37 653	Yes Bering Strait Northern Passage/ Northern Sea Route Kerch Strait	Multi	Baltic Sea Pacific Ocean Black Sea
Indonesia	54 716	Yes Strait of Malacca	Bi	Indo-Pacific
South Africa	2798	Yes Cape Sea Route	Multi	Indian Ocean Atlantic Ocean Southern Ocean
United Arab Emirates	1318	No	Bi	Persian Gulf Gulf of Oman
Egypt	2900	Yes Suez Canal	Bi	Mediterranean Sea Red Sea

The coastline lengths imply extensive territorial waters and claimed zones that can reach up to 200 nautical miles from the coast, and even further afield if

[60] Thirteen nations became partners at the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan Russia: The littoral countries in the partner grouping are Cuba (Caribbean Sea) Indonesia (Indo-Pacific) Nigeria (Gulf of Guinea, Atlantic Ocean), Thailand (Indo-Pacific), Turkey (Mediterranean and Black Sea) and Vietnam (Pacific Ocean).

islands or archipelagos and claimed territories come into play. Individually and collectively, BRICS+ members have authority over their *de jure* ocean possessions and the resources they contain, as depicted in Table 10.1. Some members (Egypt, Iran, Russia, South Africa, United Arab Emirates and Malaysia) also preside over strategic maritime straits. The littoral BRICS+ members thus hold sway over important maritime seascapes, their living and non-living resources and connectivity opportunities.

As a growing maritime bloc, BRICS+ harbours latent oceanic attributes offering constructive and disruptive opportunities. The constructive outlook rests on how BRICS+ secures and uses the oceans' stock resources, while simultaneously leveraging the oceans as a connectivity medium by embracing multilateralism and maritime cooperation. This is also about how constructively or competitively BRICS+ as a bloc eventually participates in the global maritime agenda on rules and norms to extend good governance over the world's oceans as a common good, and engages in the important fields of the blue economy, blue justice, ocean health and maritime security. The question is whether BRICS+ strives to emerge as a credible maritime security provider to safeguard blue economic opportunities, justice and ocean health. The 2018 Johannesburg Declaration, for example, advocates for an array of maritime matters to be further developed, many of which depend upon good order at sea: maritime transport, offshore oil and exploration, aquaculture, conservation and sustainable use of marine resources, marine and coastal tourism, financial and insurance services, as well as coastal industrial zone development. Unfortunately, the 2018 call for maritime cooperation received almost no traction in the 2023 Johannesburg Declaration or indeed in any of the other annual declarations (BRICS 2023).

One set of explanations for this low-keyed approach comes from the Ocean Regions Programme (2023). Firstly, BRICS+ is too loosely organised around a broad agenda formulated around matters strongly influenced by the annual host member. Secondly, not all activities, agendas and collaborations take place under the BRICS+ banner or are sanctioned explicitly as a BRICS initiative. In the maritime domain, some common threats (terrorism, piracy) are consistently noted, but institutionalised cooperation as BRICS+ remains limited. The views of the Ocean Regions Programme on maritime cooperation, governance and the economic sector align with those of Zhihua (2019). Both note the absence of, and thus the need for, in some way, institutionalising maritime cooperation (Zhihua 2019: 152). Assembling all BRICS+ members under a common overarching maritime agenda is ambitious; any real maritime substance must therefore be inferred rather than expected. The theme of the 2024 BRICS Summit in Russia

did, however, have a clear security slant, while the theme of the 2025 Summit in Brazil emphasised greater cooperation and sustainable governance. Security, cooperation and governance thus form emergent spaces upon which to impose maritime matters and agendas within BRICS+. Unfortunately, current practice shows little if any substance in strategic agendas and actual institutional progress. However, one security connection with an explicit and growing maritime profile is now emerging in naval matters.

While naval exercises do take place between BRICS members, they were not supported by an identifiable BRICS declaration or agreement until 2026. Initially, naval officials of the various member states mistakenly tended to fly the BRICS banner, for example, when naval vessels from South Africa were scheduled to visit Egypt, Russia, and Brazil in 2024 (Martin 2024). Whether a fully-fledged BRICS+ naval exercise (even if unofficial) took place remains unclear; military cooperation is officially denied by Russia, who hosted the 2024 summit (BRICS 2024a). In the meantime, China, Russia, South Africa, the UAE and Iran co-operate on naval matters (EX MOSI 3 2026), Iran, China and Russia participate in joint naval exercises (EX MARITIME SECURITY BELT 2024), China and Russia also have joint exercises (EX JOINT SEA 2022), but India, Brazil and South Africa hold separate exercises (EX IBSAMAR 2024). One new development here is that MOSI 3 (renamed Will for Peace 2026) showed a more explicit BRICS+ label, with Iranian and Emirati naval vessels joining Chinese, Russian and South African vessels in South African waters, with China as the exercise lead (Mahadzir 2026). MOSI 3, however, became extremely controversial in South Africa, sparking a political furore aimed at excluding Iranian participation. This political manoeuvring resulted in a mini-political scandal when Iran ignored a South African call to withdraw its vessels from the seagoing part of the exercise (DefenceWeb 2026).

Furthermore, two Iranian naval vessels visited South Africa on 4 April 2023 and a Chinese satellite-tracking vessel following in their wake (Jordan 2023; Bloomberg 2023). South African naval observers also attended the 2024 naval exercise 'Maritime Security Belt' in the Gulf of Oman, between China, Russia and Iran (Africa Ports 2024). In a parallel development, EX IBSAMAR VIII (India, Brazil, South Africa) took place on October 2024 (Helfrich 2024). The common denominator is the implicit BRICS+ connection with 2024 and 2026, showing a growing BRICS+ profile in South Africa's naval diplomatic activities (Brazil, China, India, Iran, Russia, South Africa and the UAE) and more explicit references to the BRICS+ nexus in statements and speeches about these activities. The Mosi exercises are, unfortunately, too often perceived as institutionalised

cooperation, though this perception is wavering within the BRICS+ family with the latest Will for Peace exercise showing elements of fragmentation, rather than strong maritime cohesion. This leaves the impression that broader maritime cooperation remains limited, while naval cooperation is the more visible and structured maritime profile. Nevertheless, the South Africa-Iran dispute of 2026 now places a question mark over future naval cooperation as well.

ALTERNATIVE OUTLOOKS: COMBINING OR MERGING BRICS+ AGENDAS

BRICS+ agendas on alternative pathways to Western dominance and the liberal approach to maritime governance and its security sectors offer avenues for cooperation. Institutionalised international norms, multilateral governance and the focus on security that call for mitigation of illegal actions are a common concern (Perez 2022: 63). For BRICS+, the choice remains that of using the oceans competitively (nationalistic or under an aggressive BRICS+ consensus) or becoming a collective authority and security provider to promote common rules for responsible ocean use.

Merging BRICS+ common and national agendas remains complex, but is an issue in urgent need of resolution. Four progressive scenarios depict pathways towards greater integration of interests through institutionalisation, policies and programmes (Shapenko et al. 2014: 25).

- Loosely organised: A club of emerging nations discussing global agendas that are dominated by other actors.
- More cooperation: Forging an alliance to influence global agendas by expanding membership and building a political alliance.
- More integration: Fostering integration by increasing economic growth and trade, and moving towards an economic union.
- More globalist beyond BRICS+: Pursuing economic, political and cultural integration to help address global problems of common concern.

The above scenarios outline alternatives that may over time become more formalised and politicised in response to developments that accommodate or constrain BRICS+ ambitions. From a dispersed club to an integrated entity, each offers ways to promote national agendas. BRICS+ must, however, also simultaneously rise to modern challenges to remain in step with a changing environment, such as rapidly rising ocean agendas. The idea of a multiplex world offers space for what one can label as 'actor blocks from the global south' finding

more manoeuvring space, acceptance, influence and tolerance for alternative ideas—spaces not so readily available to older institutions of a similar kind (Acharya 2017: 276). With BRICS+ pursuing an economic agenda focused on cooperation and development, ways to align their economic progress with the domestic difficulties of members must be part of the agenda in order to move BRICS+ forward (Shapenko et al. 2014: 29). In practice, this approach must also be integrated into the neglected maritime agenda, which has the potential to dovetail well with growth and development strategies.

MAKING THE CASE FOR A BLUE BRICS+

Imagining a blue BRICS+ ultimately raises the question of how oceans and maritime agendas might be meaningfully integrated into the grouping's broader political and economic ambitions. An initial question is whether it is about dispersed regionalism (a stable set of member states with credible maritime agendas and their execution) or about integrating such maritime ways and means into a higher-order collective body that co-ordinates and promotes the maritime programmes of member states. Should each BRICS+ member pursue a successful maritime agenda as part of its national interest (security, environmental and economic in particular), the oceans' potential and the bloc's collective leverage would increase. This integration is not simplistic: the maritime domain—encompassing security, trade, connectivity and resource exploitation—is governed by a myriad of regional and international cooperation architectures. Politically and declaratory-wise, BRICS has laid the groundwork. The challenge is to translate statements of intent into coherent strategies, programmes and institutional mechanisms. In this regard, BRICS+ fora and sectoral working groups on politics and economics, which function as the grouping's institutional 'engine rooms' must work towards integrating maritime sectors.

The case for a blue BRICS+ is further strengthened by the fact that several states already pursue national development strategies in which oceans and maritime sectors are central. China is the first country that explicitly prioritised the oceans for its economic progress. Its thirteenth five-year plan (2016-2020), premised upon maritime-based economic development, remains pivotal (Martinson 2016). Debates on the Maritime Silk Road focus primarily on its landing points across the Indo-Pacific and, more particularly, in Africa. Russia has highlighted the comprehensive management of the oceans by tasking its Marine Board with the integration of maritime affairs (Bo 2019: 37, 246). South Africa launched Operation Phakisa in 2014 to harness the country's ocean economy in

a more co-ordinated manner to boost the job-creation objectives of the National Development Plan (Findlay 2018: 248-249). India has plans for a 'Maritime India' and houses the Maritime Agenda 2010-2020, with maritime connectivity being a major focus for leveraging ocean wealth (Rao 2019: 246-247). Brazil pursues The Blue Amazon Paradigm, directed at ocean and river spaces and their preservation and sustainable use (Barros-Platiau and Barros 2022: 43). All five of the original BRICS members thus hold developmental ambitions with maritime underpinnings to optimise their use of the oceans.

Regarding later members, Egypt is formulating its National Strategy for the Blue Economy (Egypt Business Directory 2024). Iran has a maritime development strategy to develop its coast and expand economic ties with neighbours (Rubin 2024). Although not a littoral country, Ethiopia harbours its own maritime ambitions towards the blue economy, logistics and resources through the Ethiopian Maritime Authority (Ethiopian Maritime Authority n.d.). National ambition is also visible in Ethiopia's attempts to lease territory around Berbera port in Somaliland and so regain a sea outlet and become a maritime player in a strategic maritime chokepoint region (Santos 2023). Malaysia pursues a ten-year blue economy policy as ocean-related activities contribute an estimated 23% to its GDP (Azam, Zainuddin and Sarmidi 2023: 1-4).

Collectively, national strategies and programmes are indicative of a growing but fragmented maritime orientation within BRICS+. While member and partner states increasingly recognise the oceans as crucial to development, security and connectivity, these ambitions remain largely articulated at a national level and are not consolidated into a shared BRICS+ maritime vision or bloc-level stance. One caveat, as noted in the introduction, is the BRICS Working Group on Ocean and Polar Science and Technology. This working group largely focuses on agenda-setting for research but aspires to promote cooperation in the search for new knowledge and to improve understanding of ocean and polar science. Overall, the outputs appear to be research agendas with some research cruises undertaken by 2024 (BRICS 2024b).

AFRICA IN BRICS: MEMBERSHIP AND PARTNERING

African membership of the BRICS+ grouping is expanding, with three member states (Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa), one partner state (Uganda) and two undecided (Algeria and Nigeria). Twelve of the world's fastest-growing economies are in Africa, and BRICS trade with Africa is growing. Regional imports and exports show a persistent BRICS profile, the bloc being either the

top or second-place trader per African region, with the European Union its peer competitor (Hansohm and Koblianska 2025: 97).

Some observations can be made regarding the maritime domains of BRICS and Africa. Geographically, African BRICS members, partners and potential partners are located at critical maritime chokepoints or regional hubs: Algeria near the Strait of Gibraltar; Egypt at the Suez Canal; South Africa along the Cape Sea Route and Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea). Both Algeria and Nigeria pursue maritime interests. For example, Nigeria's Deep Blue Project aims to secure Nigerian and Gulf waters for trade and economic activities (Onuoha 2021). Nigeria is a leading state on the Gulf of Guinea with large offshore energy hubs. On the other hand, Algeria, an applicant for BRICS membership, does not offer a dedicated maritime security programme or strategy, but the country's constitution designates Algeria as a Mediterranean country with access to trade routes, maritime resources and a transit point for energy and trade goods—an African maritime transit zone for Mediterranean affairs (Adel 2025: 72).

Within the overall leaning of the BRICS+ agenda towards cooperation, development and Southern solidarity as primary focus areas, African membership is an important building block. The continent houses 34 coastal states and five island states holding jurisdiction over large ocean territories that collectively make up Africa's combined exclusive maritime zone of approximately thirteen million km^2 (Surbun 2021: 3). Africa's Regional Economic Communities are all coastal entities with major players involved. Algeria and Egypt (Maghreb), Ethiopia (Horn of Africa/IGAD), South Africa (SADC) and Nigeria (ECOWAS) feature fully or partially in the BRICS+ ambit. The regional level connects with new regionalism by way of regional communities depicting a geographic entity with their economic dynamics and institutions showing the multiplicity of players involved. The concept of regions as players aligns with dispersed regionalism, where different regions co-operate towards a common goal—an outlook uniquely suited to the geographically dispersed BRICS+ (Hettne 2005: 555-558).

When translating African membership of BRICS into elements of African agency relevant to maritime affairs, it is vital to note how the overall BRICS agenda counterbalances Western dominance – this directly applies to ocean governance, as well as to the bodies, regimes, rules and norms that underpin decisions on ocean affairs (Wso and Mahmood 2025: 42). Promoting and shaping ocean agendas also depends on the number of members eligible to vote for change, institutional continuity and the adoption of new rules and norms for the conduct of ocean politics and maritime security. A strong African

membership suggests more leverage in global ocean governance for BRICS+. African countries, for example, hold membership in the United Nations (UN), International Maritime Organization (IMO), International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC), Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), where votes and alternative ideas are important elements for continuity or change. African countries thus bring voting power and agency (influence to promote or block decisions and rules that negate African/Southern interests) in ocean governance.

African countries also border the Western Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and Southern and Atlantic Oceans. Collectively, African footprints on each of these oceans and seas are stepping stones for dispersed regionalism. As such, the pursuit of a maritime agenda on security, the blue economy, connectivity, environment and governance is a pathway for BRICS+ to pursue a global maritime security provider agenda for safer and sustainable seas by building maritime capacities with African members and partners. Ultimately, African members of BRICS also stand to gain influence through their economic and maritime growth hubs, enhancing their overall attraction (Shaw 2015: 259).

However, whether African agency in any way directs BRICS maritime progress is uncertain. One matter relates to whether Africa, through its BRICS members, can actively promote a common maritime agenda. In response, it should be noted that South Africa was the BRICS member that first highlighted the importance of maritime cooperation and interests in 2018. The continent also harbours extensive maritime ambitions as expressed in Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy of 2050 (AIMS-2050) and Agenda 2063. These ambitions are operationalised through the Lomé Charter, African Maritime Transport Charter, the African Blue Economy Strategy, the Djibouti and Yaoundé Codes of Conduct and the African Union Charter on Maritime Security and Development. Collectively, these architectures provide pathways for African members to exercise agency, allowing them to promote and participate in a BRICS+ maritime agenda as opposed to being spectators once maritime interests find traction. These views speak to whether Africa, through its BRICS members, will actively inject agency (ideas, strategies, institutional platforms and influence), or simply settle for membership, conferred status, declaratory solidarity and lingering expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter on a blue BRICS ties into the ocean regions framework along two primary lines. The first is that of regional orders and fragmenting geopolitics. The dispersed regional setting of BRICS members and partners reflect a scattered geographical setting across ocean regions that complicates its potential to become a maritime actor of significance. The notion and impact of fragmented geopolitics came to light when Iran attacked the UAE, with BRICS member states remaining silent on this apparent breach of BRICS solidarity and reflected in the annual themes directing heads of state meetings. In both cases, using ocean regions as a normative approach remains relevant, but arguments for a blue BRICS are undermined by the total absence of coherent oceans and maritime security debates and institutionalisation since the group's inception.

Despite the aforementioned, BRICS+ is almost exclusively composed of littoral states with strategic coastal locations, reflecting national maritime ambitions, strategies and programmes to harness their individual maritime potential for economic, developmental and political purposes. Despite these maritime ambitions, BRICS+ reflects little interest in the block's latent maritime potential. Neither in its statements (bar the 2018 Johannesburg Declaration), nor the programmes designated to promote BRICS+ agendas, do maritime matters feature prominently. BRICS+ is well positioned to engage in setting up a maritime agenda despite its dispersed geographic make-up. The record of BRICS cooperation, solidarity and advancement of the South-South agenda unfortunately reflects little progress towards institutionalising a maritime agenda for cooperation and security provision. Even the naval exercises that showed a strong cooperative profile becomes questionable given the Iran-South Africa dispute of 2026. Despite its declaratory commitments to development and cooperation, which align with progressive agendas for economic growth, the organisation's maritime dimension remains fragmented, if not entirely absent.

African membership of BRICS is growing while African partner states are also becoming more visible. Through the African Union and its regional economic communities, Africa harbours a coherent architecture of maritime strategies, agendas, charters and programmes to protect and use the oceans. The said architectures and regional structures offer opportunities to bring the African maritime agency into BRICS+, helping to overcome the prevailing seablindness. Within the BRICS+ setting, Africa can help promote the maritime agenda and, in turn, become a catalyst for advancing the notion of a productive, progressive and responsible blue BRICS.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

BELOW DECK: THE CRIMINAL MARKETS OF AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

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INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic is the second largest of the world's ocean basins, with the South Atlantic connecting Africa to South America and Antarctica. These continents are separated by vast distances covered only by the ocean. States have always attempted to control human movement by setting up borders, monitoring movement and enacting laws to control human behaviour. Yet, enforcing these measures has proven near-impossible on land. The challenge is even more pronounced at sea, where borders are imaginary and state presence limited. Because criminal networks thrive in areas with limited government presence, it is unsurprising that they gravitate towards the ocean, where oversight of human activities is limited to what can be detected through physical inspections in ports, or by monitoring vessel behaviour using technology. As technology increasingly enables vessels to travel further, faster and deeper, state and private actors, (like merchant vessels) are extending their reach into larger areas of the ocean, bringing them into conflict not only with each other, but also with criminal actors who have traditionally operated in far-off places undisturbed.

No longer home to only pirates and slave traders, the South Atlantic is also a highway for illegal fishing and trafficking in drugs and other illicit commodities. Vessel traffic through the region is also increasing due to instability around key shipping lanes, such as the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz (Vreÿ 2026). As this chapter illustrates, these factors, among others, are forcing states to expand their presence in the maritime domain to protect their national interests (Bruwer 2025a). Illegal markets present both regional and global threats: illegal fishing off

the coast of Angola, Namibia and South Africa deplete their coastal waters, while drug traffickers use Southern Africa as a transit route to consumer states. These interests are crucial for understanding who responds and how.

SELECTED ILLICIT TRADES IN AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

Illegal fishing in the border region between Angola and Namibia

Illegal fishing plagues most, if not all, of Africa's 38 coastal states. This is no different in Southern Africa, where Angola's, Namibia's and South Africa's large legal fishing industries are also subject to large-scale illegal fishing, targetting species including abalone, rock lobster and horse mackerel, among others (Bruwer 2025a).

In 2019, Namibia was rocked by the 'Fishrot' scandal. Under this elaborate scheme, companies with links to Iceland's biggest fishing business, Samherji, paid millions in bribes to the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) to secure preferential access to Namibian horse mackerel quotas via the state-owned National Fishing Corporation. This resulted in hundreds of Namibian fishers losing their jobs. Those accused of this crime, including government ministers, are still on trial (Corruption Watch 2024; Links and Mbathera 2024). In addition to the company's corrupt dealings, some Icelandic vessels have also illegally fished horse mackerel in Namibia's marine protected area (VesselTracker 2025).

These are not the only illicit actors targeting horse mackerel. While Fishrot made international headlines, a lesser-known illegal market involves the routine plundering of horse mackerel in the border region between Angola and Namibia. Angola, Namibia and South Africa are bordered by the Benguela Current, which separates the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem is one of the most productive ocean regions globally and holds rich, high-value fish stocks (The Economist 2014; Willima, Reva and Walker 2022) on which hundreds of thousands of people rely for their livelihoods.

Horse mackerel, which occurs primarily along the coast straddling the border of Angola and Namibia, is targeted both legally and illegally, primarily by foreign vessels licensed to fish in Angola. Both Angola and Namibia license foreign-flagged industrial vessels to fish in their waters, provided that such vessels operate

in joint ventures with local companies. In Namibia, the majority ownership must be vested in a Namibian company, but in Angola, some of these vessels are registered under front companies, making them *de facto* owned by foreign entities in countries like Japan, Russia, China, Spain, South Korea, and Poland (Gorez 2023). These vessels also often try to conceal their true (beneficial) ownership, which complicates attributing responsibility for the illegal activities, putting crews and the environment at risk when vessels are in a dilapidated state or when labour, safety and insurance standards are not complied with (North Atlantic Fisheries Intelligence Group and INTERPOL 2017). These foreign-flagged industrial vessels target horse mackerel both legally and illegally in Angolan waters, using tactics such as fishing during closed seasons and underreporting their catch (Mark 2023). Illegal fishing activity is concentrated in the south, bordering Namibia and Angola's Namibe and Benguela provinces, where it has resulted in declining fish stocks. This illicit practice has also impacted the livelihoods of local artisanal fishers, as it takes place even in the restricted near-shore areas reserved for them (Bruwer 2025a).

Due to the proximity of Namibia's rich fishing grounds, vessels licensed to fish in Angola also cross into Namibian waters to illegally harvest large quantities of horse mackerel. While some of the offending vessels are Angolan, many are Cameroon-flagged foreign vessels, which in recent years has become popular with foreign fishing vessels and vessels trying to evade controls, including sanctioned Russian oil vessels (Bruwer 2025b; Environmental Justice Foundation 2023; Martin 2023). To avoid detection, these vessels deactivate their automatic identification systems (AIS) when entering Namibia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), illegally tranship their catch in Angolan waters, and then enter Angolan ports with their AIS reactivated (Bruwer 2025a). A fleet of repeat offenders has been pursued by law enforcement in Angola and Namibia, but many such offenders continue to operate without consequence. After being increasingly targeted and denied port entry by Namibia, some vessels have begun to use Cape Town as a port of convenience. They change crews, resupply and refuel, but arrive without any catch on board and thereby avoid law enforcement scrutiny. Many of these illegal fishing vessels have also been apprehended for labour-related violations in the region (Bruwer 2025a; MRAG 2023).

Other species illegally targeted in the region's waters include sharks and South African abalone, a marine mollusc endemic to the South African coast, which has been targeted for decades for its high value in Asian markets. Abalone fishery is a near-shore operation, with local divers harvesting the abalone from the shore or from small boats, and then moving the catch onwards into transnational trade

chains run by Asian networks. Unlike shark fins, which often reach consumer markets by sea, abalone is primarily transported from South Africa via inland routes to neighbouring countries, from where it departs by air. The illegal harvesting of near-shore species like abalone highlights the difficulty of securing even the near-shore coastlines.

Illegal fishing has caused certain fisheries to close, total allowable catch (TAC) limits to decline sharply and legal catch to become unsustainable, even though it remains an economic necessity. The impact of illegal fishing in the region, therefore, extends well beyond species decline—it threatens food security, livelihoods and in some instances fuels transnational organised crime networks. Abalone, for example, is often traded in exchange for drug precursors, fuelling violent drug markets in South Africa (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment 2023; Okes et al. 2018; Smit 2023).

To further compound the problem, those extracting resources illegally have a competitive advantage because they can avoid regulations to which the legal industry has to adhere, pushing legal fishers out of the market (Witbooi et al. 2020). High value fisheries also incite corruption, from small-scale on-the-ground bribes paid to turn a blind eye to fisheries and labour violations, to grand corruption facilitated by government officials, as was the case with Namibia's Fishrot scandal, where government officials facilitated widespread plunder. When vessels flout safety violations, they also pose a risk to crews and the environment.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking in the South Atlantic illustrates the importance of geography to criminal network operations. Nowhere is this as obvious as in tri-oceanic South Africa, which has long been a regional transit hub for licit and illicit goods moved globally, including drugs en route to consumer markets.

While drugs moved via the South Atlantic have expanded to include synthetics and precursors, cocaine remains the primary drug moved via this corridor (Duarte and de Barros 2019; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2024). Colombia and Peru are the world's largest producers of cocaine, with Brazil serving as the key departure point to world markets, often via West, central and southern Africa. Cocaine is primarily moved to southern Africa on board shipping vessels, hidden in containers among vast quantities of legal trade (UNODC 2023b).

African seizures of containerised cocaine reached record levels in 2021. Although West Africa has served as the preferred transit region to markets in Europe, Australia and Asia (Eligh 2022), the 2023 Global Report on Cocaine warns about central and Southern Africa's increasing importance as transhipment nodes (UNODC 2023b). While South Africa has historically served as a key transit point, other southern African countries are also increasingly being used. As is typical of transhipment regions, cocaine consumption in these regions might also be on the increase (UNODC 2023b; UNODC 2025). South Africa is the region's primary cocaine transit point, acting as a primary transit point globally, and it also has the highest number of cocaine consumers in Africa (ENACT 2023b). In 2021, over 5.3 tonnes of cocaine were seized in South Africa, with record-size maritime seizures becoming more common (UNODC 2023a).

Criminal networks making use of container trafficking tap into existing trade routes, as is illustrated at South Africa's busiest ports, which serve as key ports for cocaine trafficking. Durban harbour is South Africa's premier cocaine transit point and is part of an established legal trade route from Brazil. Cape Town port is also a popular entry and exit point (Bruwer 2025a). The benefit of using legitimate shipping for container trafficking is that it provides cover for illicit shipments. Few containers are subjected to risk profiling and concealment methods are bountiful. Drugs are also often placed into sealed containers or loaded onto vessels after the ships depart from port. Some shipments are parasitically attached to vessels' hulls by divers who also collect the shipment once the vessel reaches its destination. Containers often transit through multiple ports, where they are transhipped. This not only provides potential opportunities for interception, but it could also hide the origin of a shipment, raising less suspicion. A 400kg cocaine seizure in Walvis Bay in 2018, when a shipment from Brazil passed through Cape Town before being seized in Walvis Bay, illustrates how transhipped illicit shipments can be missed in port (ENACT 2023b; Dolley 2023; Legg, 2014).

Illicit shipments are also transhipped or dropped off at sea for collection by smaller vessels. While container vessels' cargo passes through ports, smaller vessels and pleasure craft like yachts and rubber ducks used to move drugs remain out at sea or dock at unsecured areas along the coastline, including beaches, small harbours and marinas. The use of these vessels and others is regularly observed in South Africa. Over a tonne of cocaine was seized from a converted fishing vessel in Saldanha in 2021, exposing a Bulgarian trafficking network (McCain 2021; Jesperson and Verrier 2024), and in 2024, cocaine was seized from a rubber duck in sleepy Still Bay, a holiday town on South Africa's Garden Route.

Cocaine shipments from Mozambique have also passed through South Africa, as cocaine is increasingly being moved via Mozambique and Angola. This is likely the result of Lusophone links with Brazil (UNODC 2023b), and weak governance and law enforcement. This could also be due to the oversupply of cocaine, causing networks to seek new markets.

Angola acts as a transit point for cocaine to both Southern and West Africa (ENACT 2023a; Duarte and De Barros 2019; UNODC 2023b). The Global Report on Cocaine warns that although there are currently limited incidents of cocaine trafficking via Namibia, its location between transit zones could make it vulnerable to increased drug trafficking (UNODC 2023b; UNODC 2025). At present, most interceptions in Namibia are made from containers in the port of Walvis Bay, which is Namibia's busiest port. Walvis Bay also serves as a feeder port, which risks allowing illicit shipments to be missed as containers in transit are not scrutinised.

In addition to cocaine, precursors used to manufacture synthetic drugs are increasingly being seized in the region. Precursors intended for drug manufacturing are, however, difficult to identify because they have other, legal uses. According to the United States Department of State: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (2023), South Africa is one of the premier precursor importers globally. Precursors typically arrive from China and India (Dolley 2024b) and have been seized at both Cape Town and Namibia's Walvis Bay, which is a transit point to Cape Town (Eligh 2021b). As with cocaine-linked corruption, corrupt officials in South Africa and Namibia are suspected of facilitating the diversion of legally imported precursors to drug manufacturers (Eligh 2021a; Eligh 2021b).

Methamphetamine is also increasingly being seized in Southern Africa, particularly in Mozambique and South Africa (UNODC 2023a; UNODC 2024). Although methamphetamine produced in Mexico has been seized in South Africa after being trafficked along the same route as cocaine from Brazil (Eligh 2023; Eligh 2021b), most methamphetamine moving through South Africa arrives from Nigerian supply chains, transiting through countries like the DRC, Angola and Namibia (United States Department of State: Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs 2023; Eligh, 2021a). From Walvis Bay, it is usually moved to Cape Town for onward distribution (Eligh, 2021b), including to other African countries, Europe, Australia and Asia (UNODC 2023a; UNODC 2024).

Methamphetamine manufacturing labs are increasingly being identified in South Africa and the United States has warned that Mexican cartels are increasingly present in Southern Africa (Matibe 2025b). Methamphetamine consumption is also increasing, with South Africa possibly being one of the biggest methamphetamine consumers globally (Dolley 2024b; South African Police Service 2024; Eligh 2021a). Precursors used to manufacture methamphetamines are exchanged for abalone, conflating the two seemingly unrelated illegal markets and encouraging local consumption, methamphetamine production and associated drug-trade violence (Witbooi et al. 2020). The impacts of drugs trafficked to Africa via the South Atlantic therefore extend beyond rising consumption and failing health, fuelling violence, corruption, and other illegal markets.

NATURAL RESOURCES MOVED FROM LAND

While the region's waters hold a wealth of minerals, oil and gas, Southern Africa's coastal Atlantic states also serve as transport hubs for their landlocked Southern African neighbours exporting commodities, including natural resources like timber and critical minerals. These transport hubs include the Lobito Corridor, which acts as a gateway for minerals from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Both the Lobito Corridor and Port are being developed with investment from the United States (US) and China, and could eventually rival Walvis Bay, where goods travelling via the Walvis Bay corridor are exported from Namibia (NAMPORT 2023). While this development will greatly benefit and facilitate legal trade, it could equally benefit illegal trade through expanded transport options, potentially exacerbating security threats posed by countries experiencing instability, like the DRC (Ngorora 2025).

The route is already used for illicit exports, such as the 3000 tonnes of quarts, destined for illegal export to China, which was intercepted in Luanda (Southern African Times 2025). Timber is also regularly seized, including species regulated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), like rosewood and kiaat. Due to its size, timber is moved on board container vessels, primarily leaving the region from Walvis Bay on route primarily to China (Rooikat Trust 2025), but also Europe and Vietnam (Bruwer 2025a). Regular seizures are also made in Angola (Nott, Nott and Newton 2019). Illicit exports include timber from Namibia, Angola, the DRC and Zambia (Rooikat Trust 2023; Nott, Nott and Newton 2019; Lukumbuzya and Sianga 2017). Due to parallel legal and illegal timber markets, illegal timber is laundered

through legal shipments by forging CITES export permits or misdeclaring shipments.

The illegal trade in natural resources via the ocean illustrates how Africa is not only the recipient of illicit maritime markets, but also a driver thereof.

THE RESPONSE TO ILLICIT MARKETS IN AFRICA'S SOUTH ATLANTIC

Criminal networks operating in Africa's oceans have been the subject of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, highlighting their far-reaching impacts on both coastal and landlocked states, security and navigation, in Africa and globally (see, for example, United Nations Security Council 2022). The unique nature of vessels at sea, however, makes countering illicit activities using vessels extremely challenging. In addition to having to identify illicit activities in the vast maritime domain, responses are dictated by the complex and limited jurisdiction applicable at sea. In addition, vessels move between jurisdictions, carry goods and crew from across the globe and can be registered in countries to which they have no link or accountability. States struggle to control activities in their own waters, especially in their large EEZs. Furthermore, half of the ocean consists of the high seas, where there is even less governance and more limited jurisdiction regimes (see, for example, Bruwer 2023; Bruwer and Ojewale, 2025; Jacobsen et al. 2026).

The United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS) regulates human activities at sea and provides for jurisdiction applicable to criminality. With the exception of a few crimes, like piracy and human trafficking, vessels on the high seas are subject only to the jurisdiction of their flag state. This is challenging for most states since vessels typically operate far from their flag state, but it is especially problematic when a vessel is registered to a flag of convenience, a country which has neither the ability nor the intention to control it.

This does not, however, mean that states do not wish to control human activities at sea. As states increasingly enter the maritime domain to exploit its extractive, trade and security prospects, they are expanding their military and law enforcement reach. This is regulated through international instruments like UNCLOS, the Food and Agriculture Organisation Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported Fishing (PSMA), the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC), and the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and

Psychotropic Substances. There are also International Maritime Organisation (IMO) resolutions, such as the resolution on the dark fleet (IMO 2023), which is aimed at vessels attempting to avoid controls, and the IMO guidelines to prevent and suppress the smuggling of wildlife on ships engaged in international traffic (IMO 2022). Most recently, states have adopted the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty, which aims to protect areas beyond national jurisdiction from overexploitation and to ensure equal access to ocean resources.

Although illicit trade in Africa's South Atlantic is not the key focus of any instruments or forums, there are general regional efforts like the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) and the African Atlantic States Process. None of these are, however, primarily aimed at criminal activity. There are also African instruments aimed at human activities at sea, including the African Union (AU) African Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS), Southern African Development Community (SADC) Integrated Maritime Security Strategy, SADC Transnational Organised Crime Strategy, the Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa (Yaoundé Code of Conduct/ YCOC), the Djibouti Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden (DCOC) and its Jeddah Amendment, SADC Atlantic and the Benguela Current Convention (BCC). While South Africa and Angola are both members of the BCC and the DCOC and the YCOC, respectively, Namibia is a member of only the BCC. This means that there is gap in regional security architecture collectively addressing maritime security challenges in Africa's South Atlantic.

Regional states also engage in exercises and cooperative forums with foreign states, reflecting the region's strategic importance to these external entities, but also Southern African states' reliance on relationships with external powers. The US has engaged with Namibia (Matibe 2025a) and Angola (Matibe 2025b) on maritime security and will contribute to developing the Angolan coast guard (Matibe 2024; DefenceWeb 2024b). The Indian Navy visited Namibia in 2023 and has participated in regular exercises with South Africa and Brazil (Pereira 2013; Wingrin 2024). The US and Portugal have trained Angola's marines, and Brazil has a standing capacity-building relationship with Namibia's navy. There have also been naval exercises between South Africa, China and Russia (DefenceWeb 2024a; Martin 2024), which, in 2026, included the United Arab Emirates and, controversially, Iran. Then there are also the annual US-led Obangame and Cutlass Express military exercises. The US has suggested that Cutlass Express might be expanded to include Southern Africa (Matibe 2025a).

The challenge for African countries aiming to protect their coasts from criminal infiltration is therefore not the lack of instruments attempting to regulate and guide the response, or even relationships with other partners. Instead, it is their limited capability to operate at sea, to establish and maintain a maritime presence and maritime domain awareness (MDA). This is coupled with a lack of national maritime security strategies, which is linked to the failure to recognise the far-reaching impacts of maritime criminality on citizens and the state.

As more vessels frequent the Cape Sea route, carrying both licit and illicit goods, the task at hand will become increasingly difficult. Yet Southern Africa's navies remain small. South Africa's naval chief regularly cites a severe lack of capability due to underfunding, leaving them ill-equipped to monitor South Africa's EEZ. Despite their large EEZs, Namibia and Angola experience similar constraints, not only limited to navies, but also maritime law enforcement units and border management authorities.

But the PSMA is only effective if all regional states collectively deny foreign-flagged illegal fishing vessels port entry. Drug trafficking vessels can only be stopped if they are pursued by law enforcement, including along coastlines and small harbours. Mutual legal assistance can only take place if legal frameworks allow it, and thorough vessel profiling can only happen if maritime agencies have a shared vessel platform, like a maritime single window, and if surveillance and coordination centres have MDA capability. Unlike the Gulf of Guinea and the Western Indian Ocean, the region lacks dedicated coordination and information-sharing centres.

CONCLUSION

Southern Africa bordering the Atlantic is a recipient, a participant and a departure point for illicit activities facilitated by the sea. The transnational nature of the ocean, and indeed maritime trade, means that no country in Southern Africa can counter these illicit offshore trades alone. Without cooperation and pooling of resources between neighbouring African countries, trans-Atlantic neighbours and flag states, the criminal markets along Africa's South Atlantic coast will persist.

The region must leverage its geographic and strategic importance in order to protect the interests of regional African states and the vessels and goods critical to global trade that pass through their waters (El Aynaoui 2025). But Southern Africa's states can only do so if directed by sound strategies guiding their priorities

and their cooperation. National maritime security strategies can provide a roadmap and an evidence base to channel much-needed funding to securing maritime domains, provided they are enforced at sea and in ports. Greater MDA, bigger navies and expanded maritime law enforcement units are, however, only one part of the plan. Security interventions cannot exist in isolation and should form part of holistic, whole-of-society interventions to address the drivers and impacts of maritime crime.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

SADC MARITIME INSECURITY: MAPPING THREATS, STAKEHOLDERS AND SOLUTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), with its extensive coastline and considerable maritime wealth, faces complex maritime insecurity that cuts across sovereignty, governance, socio-economic development and regional integration (see Figure 12.1). The Indian and Atlantic Ocean littorals, linked by vital chokepoints such as the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel, are central to global trade and energy flows. While the sea is an 'inextricable part' (Potgieter 2021: 24) of the maritime history of both sub-regions, their trajectories differ: the Indian Ocean coast is defined by an ancient Swahili heritage, with its legacy of coastal and ocean trade, migration, slavery, conquest and enduring patterns of piracy and smuggling, whereas the Atlantic coast was largely shaped by transatlantic trade, slavery, colonialism and resource extraction. These diverse histories and their overlapping colonial legacies continue to influence economic activities, security risks and approaches to maritime governance. Although insecurity along the Indian Ocean coast is more frequently analysed, the Atlantic coast is increasingly experiencing maritime security challenges (Bruwer 2025; see also Bruwer, Chapter 11 in Part II). Despite their differences, both regions require a shift from more land-oriented perspectives towards reclaiming maritime consciousness and moving

beyond immediate issues such as overfishing and mineral extraction, to instead focus on long-term environmental health and effective governance of their shared maritime interests (Potgieter 2021).

The SADC maritime domain is destabilised by illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, trafficking, piracy and environmental degradation, amongst others. These threats are no longer merely in the sphere of criminal operations—they are structural issues of resource governance, environmental degradation and transnational crime that have become existential concerns to states and societies. This is essentially what Buzan and Wæver refer to as the 'impact of geographic proximity on security interaction' and 'securitisation', which elevates non-traditional domains to the centre of regional security agendas (Buzan and Wæver 2003: xvi, 4, 44—48). Our understanding of security must therefore be more holistic and move beyond an outdated, state-centric or military perspective to bridge five interlocked sectors—military, political, economic, societal and environmental—that represent this deeply interconnected and complex contemporary security network (Buzan [1983] 1991: 112-142).



Figure 12.1: SADC Member States[61] (SADC 2022c).

[61] The Southern African Development Community (SADC) comprises sixteen countries. Of these ten are coastal and island member states bordering the Atlantic or Indian Oceans, namely Angola, Comoros, Democratic

Due to the multiplicity of state and non-state actors active in the maritime domain, diverse governance frameworks and the absence of a strong regional authority in the maritime sphere, security challenges in the SADC region are highly complex (Walker 2019). States, navies, policing agencies, private security firms and regional and international organisations operate with overlapping mandates and divergent interests, resulting in a fragmented security architecture where coordination remains a persistent challenge. Addressing insecurity, therefore, requires a layered approach, combining hard security measures with broader governance, environmental and developmental strategies. Naval, policing, private security and environmental protection efforts must be reinforced by technological innovation, good governance and effective regional cooperation. Reconciling traditional security requirements with the pursuit of human and ecological well-being is imperative. This chapter thus examines the dynamics of maritime insecurity, the roles of key stakeholders and potential responses to strengthen security in the SADC maritime domain.

The research approach utilised is qualitative and interpretive, drawing on a critical analysis of relevant security and strategic matters. The multidimensional nature of maritime insecurity in the SADC region was examined through an extensive review of official documents, policies, scholarly literature and news material. Within this framework, maritime insecurity is understood as not only a material threat but also as a wider societal issue embedded in governance discourses. By integrating political, institutional, socio-economic and operational perspectives with existing and emerging security realities, a comparative analysis of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coastal regions was positioned within the SADC regional context, with due consideration of the diverse responses required to address maritime insecurity.

CHARACTERISING INSECURITY

Due to the vastness of SADC's maritime domain, with an estimated combined Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) exceeding 8.5 million km^2 (SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026a), and limited enforcement capacity, the region faces significant and complex maritime security challenges across its largely unpoliced waters. Historically, the dominant maritime threat paradigm centred on interstate conflict, ranging from naval battles and maritime power projection to blockades (Bueger and Edmunds 2017: 1298). Today,

Republic of Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa and Tanzania. The six landlocked countries are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

threats once considered non-traditional (such as piracy, terrorism, IUU fishing and trafficking) are central concerns for naval and coast guard establishments worldwide. Because there is no universally established definition, maritime security remains fluid and context driven. It is increasingly influenced by non-state actors, 'directly linked … with human security and development' and expands as challenges broaden (Chapsos 2016). Furthermore, emerging vulnerabilities, ranging from climate change and environmental security to threats against digital infrastructure and cybersecurity, are being compounded by artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicles. A lack of consensus therefore persists regarding definitions and prioritisation, which is exacerbated by the uncertainty over the adequacy of traditional regulatory systems and official state mechanisms to combat these threats (see the debate in Chapsos 2016; Pandey and Stuart 2024; Martin 2025). Viewed through the ocean regions framework adopted in this volume, these challenges are not simply a collection of maritime security problems occurring at sea. Rather, they are produced by the interactions between governance institutions, regional political dynamics, economic dependencies, environmental change and transnational networks that together constitute the SADC maritime domain as an ocean region.

The likelihood of traditional threats, such as interstate war or maritime power projection into the SADC region by an external power, remains very low. Nevertheless, states share obligations under international law to safeguard freedom of navigation, secure sea lanes of communication and uphold maritime security both within their territorial waters and collectively on the high seas (United Nations 1982: UNCLOS Parts II and VII). Although these responsibilities are clear, SADC states lack the capacity to fully meet them (Walker 2019: 55-56). While no direct conventional threat to safe navigation currently exists, complex maritime insecurity persists.

The traditional hotspots for piracy and armed robbery at sea around Africa remain the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa. However, these threats have spread southwards. Piracy and maritime crime are reported along the coasts of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), while Namibia is considered to be at very low risk. With incidents in the Gulf of Guinea declining in 2023 and 2024, Angola emerged as the country with the most recorded incidents against berthed and anchored vessels, as well as infringements involving fuel smuggling and other oil-related crimes (Gard 2025; Bruwer 2025: 9). Many pirate attacks have historically occurred along the East Coast of Africa, across the Western Indian Ocean and in the Mozambique Channel. Although Somali piracy has declined due to sustained anti-piracy efforts, similar incidents have

also occurred in SADC waters (Marggraff 2025: 11—13; Vreÿ and Blaine 2024). The Mozambique Channel, a critical artery for global trade routes, has become an area of heightened concern. Pirates and armed robbers have targeted commercial vessels and recreational craft between Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique and South Africa (Vesseltracker 2025). On 28 November 2025, two experienced sailors were discovered dead aboard their drifting yacht *Acteon* in the Mozambique Channel, approximately 200 miles northeast of Beira, Mozambique. As the vessel had sent a distress signal two days earlier, the incident prompted an investigation into possible piracy, but no official link has been made at the time of writing (Fretter 2025; Vesseltracker 2025).

Due to its unique biodiversity, the SADC coastline is very rich in both living and non-living ocean resources. Hydrocarbon extraction from offshore installations is critically important to various SADC countries, acting as a key driver for energy security, economic growth and industrialisation. An increase in regional and local production will reduce the impact of fluctuating global oil prices and import dependence (Africa Energy Chamber 2025). Angola is a mature producer with major offshore facilities, while the DRC is collaborating in the development of shared offshore cross-border zones, enhancing the potential of future security challenges (Energy Capital & Power 2024). In March 2021, an attack by an Islamic State-backed group on the town of Palma, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique, disrupted the operations of a major natural gas project. SADC countries collectively condemned the 'barbaric acts of terrorism that will continue to destabilise our Region' (SADC 2021) and deployed a military mission to quell the insurgency and secure the gas-rich zones. Although insurgents currently do not focus on maritime terror, it is certainly a future possibility in a region with a deep maritime culture (Potgieter 2024a). However, it must be noted that West African examples show that attacks and interference with hydrocarbon infrastructure often trigger environmental disasters and ecological damage, stimulating further insecurity (Mokgonyana 2024).

As SADC fish stocks span diverse Atlantic and Indian Ocean waters, IUU fishing (effectively the theft of marine resources) is serious and pervasive, posing severe socio-economic and environmental threats. Moreover, crimes associated with fishing vessels extend beyond IUU fishing to include supply chain violations, smuggling, human trafficking and forced labour (Bruwer 2025: 12). The fisheries sector is vital to food security, income and employment, contributing an average of 3.5% to the regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing roughly sixteen per cent of the total animal protein intake (SADC 2022a; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024: 30; see also Bruwer, Chapter 11,

and Alexandre, Chapter 9 in Part II). The depletion of fish stocks threatens both food security and the livelihoods of coastal communities. IUU fishing not only creates unfair competition but also inflicts significant harm to ecosystems and biodiversity. It contributes to the collapse of fish stocks and the potential extinction of high-value species (SADC 2019). Species such as South African abalone and West Coast rock lobster are relentlessly targeted by poachers and organised crime networks. This has fuelled the growth of transnational criminal networks, criminalised vulnerable coastal communities and led to the severe depletion of fish stocks—the abalone population, for example, has declined to just one per cent of its 1990 levels (DFFE 2025b).

Annual losses to IUU fishing across SADC are staggering, estimated at 26 million tonnes, valued at approximately US$11 billion in revenues. Namibia alone suffers annual losses of around 400 000 tons, equivalent to 1.5 billion Namibian Dollars (Bruwer 2025: 14–16; SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026a). Because IUU fishing is often linked to wider transnational organised crime networks, it undermines governance and the rule of law in the maritime sector.

With traffic through SADC ports projected to reach 500 million tonnes by 2027, the region faces a critical bottleneck as many ports are operating at maximum capacity, suffering from delays and facing security challenges that cause them to fall short of global standards. To address these issues, improvements are required to sustain regional integration and economic development (SADC 2022b). Port security is a significant and multifaceted challenge in the SADC region and is considered 'a strategic determinant of economic sovereignty' (Africa Security Analysis 2025). It deals with a wide range of criminal activities, from theft, smuggling and human trafficking to terrorism and emerging digital threats, exacerbated by poor port management, corruption and crumbling or poor infrastructure (Blédé 2016). For example, the Mozambican port of Mocimboa da Praia in the Cabo Delgado province was captured by insurgents in August 2020 and recaptured a year later by a joint Rwandan and Mozambican force (*The Mozambique Times* 2025). While the Mozambican ports of Beira and Nacala face challenges due to criminality and infrastructure constraints, political instability exacerbates their risk potential. Although the threat of sea mines or underwater explosive devices in the SADC region remains low, such an asymmetric danger cannot be dismissed, particularly if linked to acts of terrorism (Potgieter 2024a). A single well-placed device could shut down a major port and cause significant economic disruption, while its clearance would demand highly specialised equipment and expertise.

Despite the substantial potential of South Africa's ports, they are amongst the lowest-ranked ports in the world according to reliable global indexes such as the Container Port Performance Index of the World Bank and S&P Global Market Intelligence (World Bank 2025). Complex security challenges are compounded by low productivity, old infrastructure, corruption and poor management. Various *force majeure* closures have occurred at the Port of Durban due to civil unrest and rioting (2021), cyberattacks and system failure (2021) and labour unrest (2022). In addition, severe weather conditions, operational challenges, as well as theft and sabotage, have repeatedly halted shipping or hampered the movement of goods to and from the port between 2022 and 2024. This resulted in the Port of Durban ranking 'dead last' out of 403 global ports in the 2024 Container Port Performance Index (Ryan 2025). South Africa's other busy ports did not fare much better with the Port of Ngqura (Coega) placed 402nd, the Port of Cape Town 400th and the Port of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) 359th (World Bank 2025). The Southern African Association of Freight Forwarders, however, questioned the accuracy of these measurements and ranked South African ports between 250th and 280th globally (Thorne 2024).

While human life depends on the oceans for climate regulation, food, hydrocarbons and global trade, there is sufficient scientific evidence to justify global concerns regarding the serious threat to ocean health. Climate change is altering the physical and chemical composition of ocean ecosystems, shifting seasonal patterns, disrupting marine habitats and impacting on the availability of fish, leading to dire consequences for coastal communities. Compounded by anthropogenic pressures like pollution, IUU fishing and inappropriate coastal developments, these factors present a significant challenge to global ocean health and the fragile marine ecosystems in the SADC region. Given that ocean resources are vital for economic growth and development, food security and livelihoods, sustained economic benefits require good governance, security and sustainable environmental management (Cooley et al. 2022: 381—397, 410—415, 456—469).

The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, such as severe storms and flooding in coastal areas, together with rising sea levels and widespread environmental degradation, has become a defining feature of the region's coastal environment, specifically along the Indian Ocean coast (Trisos et al. 2022: 1333, 1357). When these ecological stresses are coupled with poor governance and unsustainable ocean management, they intensify competition over scarce resources and contribute to maritime insecurity, manifesting in fishing infringements, poaching, piracy and various other maritime crimes.

Vulnerabilities are particularly acute in areas where state institutions lack adequate law enforcement and security capacity, and are further exacerbated by socio-economic stressors such as poverty and inequality (Potgieter 2018: 51). These threats to marine resources, coastal infrastructure and ecosystems directly endanger human health, livelihoods and food security—core pillars of human, national and regional security. Consequently, such adverse and tangible conditions in the region must be understood not only as environmental concerns but also as fundamental maritime security challenges (Potgieter 2024b). As maritime security is indispensable to sustainable ocean development, the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and security risks underscores the need for integrated, holistic approaches to ocean and security governance in the SADC maritime domain. This view is in line with critical understandings of security that move beyond strict military threats and reinforce the value of ocean regions as an analytical concept to address these integrated challenges.

Increasing digitisation, automation and reliance on information and communication technologies (ICT) have introduced critical vulnerabilities in the maritime domain. Cyber criminals endeavour to obtain access to sensitive data on financial arrangements, vessel movements, cargoes, as well as naval, coast guard and maritime security operations. Africa has limited national and regional capacity for addressing cybersecurity (Sime 2023). Given their strategic and economic value, ports have become prime targets. With cyberattacks emerging as a growing threat to regional security, economic stability and critical infrastructure, SADC leaders maintain that cybersecurity must be improved (Mungadze 2019). A major incident could have severe consequences. This was demonstrated by the 2021 cyberattacks on South Africa's Transnet, which caused considerable economic loss and disrupted port operations at Cape Town, Durban, Ngqura and Port Elizabeth (Gesami and Kasembeli 2022). Although global records acknowledge hundreds of maritime cyberattacks annually, the true extent is unknown, as incidents are significantly underreported due to concerns over trust and insurance liabilities.

Enduring global geopolitical tensions and Middle East conflicts have impacted SADC maritime security as shipping traffic is increasingly diverted around the Cape of Good Hope. This rerouting places considerable pressure on regional ports and infrastructure, straining resources and increasing operational risks. This can be demonstrated by the sinking of the Panama-registered *Ultra Galaxy* off the SADC Atlantic Coast on 11 July 2024 and the loss of 200 containers from six ships along the coastal region during the winter storms of 2024 (Schuler

2024; Lepic 2024). Moreover, monitoring the route has become more difficult due to its potential exploitation for transnational illegal activities, including cyber threats (Bruwer 2024). Consequently, the region has seen increasing naval deployments and 'diplomatic signalling' by major powers (Nel and Blaine 2026).

Some traditional threats remain relevant in the region, yet they are increasingly compounded by emerging challenges, making a dual focus on both categories essential for maritime security. Within SADC, these concerns are consistently highlighted in maritime security dialogues. Despite ongoing efforts at national and regional levels, programmes designed to mitigate maritime insecurity and advance the blue economy agenda have not delivered as anticipated, emphasising the link between economic development, governance and security. The verdict is clear: maritime insecurity remains, it is intensifying in some areas, and the growing influence of climate change on security is evident. The persistent questions regarding sufficient capacity and capability within SADC to address maritime insecurity and the pressing need for effective action will be explored in the following sections.

STAKEHOLDERS AND MECHANISMS

The preceding section highlights the fact that SADC's maritime security challenges play out in a complex geopolitical landscape moulded by the strategic sea lines of communication (SLOC) of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, layered regional relationships, and significant external influences. The SADC Indian Ocean littoral states face high-volume trade routes and historical threats like piracy that drive cooperation through frameworks such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct and regional maritime domain awareness (MDA) initiatives linked to the African Union's (AU) Integrated Maritime Strategy (Mafwila 2023: 9–11). This maritime geography remains important not only for regional trade but also for great-power competition. As an example, India seeks to position itself as a 'net security provider' in the Western Indian Ocean and has launched joint exercises with African navies to enhance interoperability and counterbalance China's expanding naval and commercial footprint in the region (Reed and Schipani 2025; see also Vreÿ, Chapter 10 in Part II). Coastal states on the Atlantic, meanwhile, are more concerned with South Atlantic maritime security, where SADC's mechanisms are less mature. SADC's Integrated Maritime Security Strategy and the Standing Maritime Committee seek to harmonise these diverse priorities under the AU's peace and security architecture. External players such as the European Union (EU), France, China and India exert influence by providing

capacity-building, supplying surveillance systems and conducting naval diplomacy, which may complicate African governance but offer resources and strategic partnerships (Walker 2025). This section will deal with SADC, national governance and regulatory frameworks as well as the array of actors involved in the maritime security domain.

Maritime governance and regulatory frameworks

The blue economy is significant to the African continent, generating approximately US$300 billion in economic value and supporting around 49 million jobs, while simultaneously serving as a key driver of sustainable development. On a regional level, it remains a fundamental component of economic development within SADC, sustaining millions of livelihoods while increasingly being prioritised within national and regional development frameworks. Fisheries represent about 3.5% of the region's GDP, provide direct employment to an estimated 3.5 million people (with one million in indirect employment roles), while annual exports are valued at around US$152 million, and imports at around US$100 million (SADC 2022a; United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024). Although precise and reliable figures are unavailable, considering the extent of economic activities associated with the sea in SADC, the blue economy has substantial economic growth and development potential as a mechanism for poverty alleviation, food security and sustainable marine management (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation 2024).

Improving maritime governance in the SADC region has become increasingly important due to the potential of the blue economy, evolving maritime security challenges, the imperative to protect the environment and surging international trade. Sustainable maritime governance requires a multi-layered approach to protect ocean resources, enable economic activity and secure the maritime domain (Walker 2025). Although the regional body does not have one single maritime authority with binding legal jurisdiction, SADC maritime security mechanisms and frameworks are a range of structures, regulatory policies, strategies and cooperative mechanisms aimed at providing strategic direction, promoting cooperation and enhancing safety and security in the SADC maritime domain.

The SADC Standing Maritime Committee (SMC), established in 1995 under the SADC Inter-State Defence and Security Committee (ISDSC), serves as the primary mechanism for coordinating regional naval cooperation and maritime security efforts among SADC member states. Its mandate includes promoting

regional peace, protecting SLOC, strengthening naval capacity and facilitating unified responses to maritime threats across the Indian and Atlantic Ocean regions, including island states (Walker 2019: 55-57). Although the SMC provides an important platform for dialogue and policy recommendations, maritime security has received inconsistent high-level attention within SADC structures. Implementation has been constrained by fragmented institutional coordination, leadership rotation, fluctuating participation and weak institutional memory. Persistent gaps remain evident in the recurring prioritisation of unresolved initiatives, including the establishment of regional MDA centres, sustainable funding mechanisms, vessel-reporting frameworks and a permanent maritime security coordination function (Walker 2025).

The SADC Integrated Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) aims to harmonise regional maritime security efforts through enhanced coordination, naval cooperation and the development of joint operational capacity, providing a comprehensive framework for maritime surveillance, response and governance. The initial 2011 Maritime Security Strategy, largely driven by counter-piracy concerns in the Indian Ocean, adopted a narrow operational focus and faced significant implementation challenges, including limited institutional coordination, funding constraints and slow establishment of MDA structures. Recognising its declining relevance, the SADC SMC called for a strategic review, leading to the development of the IMSS through extensive member state consultation. Formally adopted in 2022, the IMSS introduces an integrated approach centred on governance, security, environmental management, maritime economic development and maritime awareness, marking a shift toward holistic and forward-looking regional maritime governance, while retaining the maritime security governance structure of SADC (DefenceWeb 2022; Coelho 2013).

The SADC Protocol on Fisheries realises the crucial role of fisheries in the social and economic spheres of the region while highlighting the need for the sustainable use and protection of living marine resources. It seeks to harmonise domestic legislation and ensure effective management of shared resources whilst enhancing cooperation in the maritime domain. Its key objectives include sustainable use of marine resources, the protection of fishing community livelihoods, regional cooperation and capacity building (SADC 2006).

Due to the major threat posed by IUU fishing in the region, SADC ministers pledged in 2008 to combat it by creating the SADC Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre (MCSCC) (2026b). Its charter was approved in 2017, entering into force in 2023. The MCSCC was designed to combat IUU

fishing and underpin blue economy growth in the region. Based in Maputo, Mozambique, the centre is expected to become operational in 2026 (Stop Illegal Fishing 2023a; MRA 2024).

SADC does not have an MDA policy or coordinating platform; however, guidelines are provided by the IMSS as well as the MDA Study Report completed in 2023. This report contains proposals which include the following: developing an MDA strategy, strengthening current MDA systems, investing in technology, developing a common information sharing platform, providing training and capacity building, and encouraging national and regional cooperation and coordination (Mafwila 2023). Various SADC environmental protocols on pollution, biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation include coastal and marine dimensions[62]. These contribute to regional policy coherence on environmental protection in maritime spaces. SADC further promotes alignment with international law and conventions (such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and International Maritime Organisation (IMO) regulations) and encourages members to develop national laws and policies to enforce these.

It must be noted that although SADC provides platforms for member states to co-operate on maritime issues, its ability to enforce regional maritime governance is restricted by uneven/limited resources, national capacity disparities, limited surveillance infrastructure, insufficiently trained personnel, and a weak presence at sea (Ndinga-Muvumba and Pharoah 2008).

The national legislation, policies and strategies that individual member states have developed to align with SADC, the AU and International bodies are summarised in Table 12.1 below.

[62] See for example protocol on Fisheries 2006, Protocol on wildlife conservation and law enforcement and Protocol on environmental management for sustainable development. Available at: https://www.sadc.int/pages/sadc-protocols (Accessed 19 March 2026).

Table 12.1: Maritime legislation by SADC littoral and island states. Source: compiled by the authors.[63]

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
DRC	Code of Maritime Navigation	Basic framework for marine transport
	Code of River and Lake Navigation	Backbone of legislation in this sector
Angola	Law 29/22 of 29 Aug 22	Established the power of courts, including jurisdiction over maritime matters
	Law 27/12 of 28 Aug 12	Merchant Navy Law, the main statute on port state control
	Law 14/10 of 14 Jul 10	Maritime Zones under the jurisdiction of Angola
	IMO Implementation Strategy (2025-2029)	Implement applicable international maritime treaties to comply with flag, port and coastal state obligations
Namibia	Merchant Shipping Act 1951	Primary legislation governing merchant shipping in Namibia
	Marine Traffic Act, Act 2 of 1981	Regulates maritime traffic, including innocent passage
	Law of the Sea, Act 3 of 1990	Territorial Sea and EEZ of Namibia
	Namibian Ports Authority Act, Act 2 of 1994	Established the Namibian Ports Authority, for ports and lighthouses
	Marine Resources Act, Act 27 of 2000	Conserve marine ecosystem, utilise, protect and promote sustainable marine resources

[63] Maritime legislation, policies and regulations. Sourced from the websites of the governments of the SADC member states listed.

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
South Africa	SAMSA Act, Act 5 of 1998	Established SAMSA, to ensure safety of life at sea, combat pollution and promote national maritime interests
	Merchant Shipping Act, Act 57 of 1951	Governs registration and inspection of all ships
	Marine Traffic Act, Act 2 of 1981	Regulates marine traffic
	Marine Pollution (Prevention) Act, Act 2 of 1986	Regulates marine pollution
	Maritime Zones Act, Act 15 of 1994	Established the territorial zones
	Wreck and Salvage Act, Act 94 of 1996	Framework for salvaging, assisting endangered ships, and compensation
	National Ports Act, Act 12 of 2005	Established National Ports Authority
	Marine Living Resources Act, Act 18 of 1998	Regulates fishing
	Integrated Coastal Management Act, Act 24 of 2008	Sustainable coastal management and conservation
Mozambique	Law 10/2022	Established the authorities of maritime courts
	Law 20/2019	Law of the Sea
	Law 22/2013	Fisheries Law

Country	Legislation and Policies	Comment
Tanzania	Tanzania Shipping Agencies Act of 2017	Established the Tanzania Shipping Agencies Corporation
	Ports Act 17 of 2004	Established the Tanzania Ports Authority
	Merchant Shipping Act of 2003	Applicable to Tanzanian mainland
	Merchant Transport Act of 2006	Applicable to Zanzibar
Mauritius	Merchant Shipping Act 2007	Security of ships in Mauritius
	Piracy and Maritime Violence Act 2011	To prosecute persons suspected of piracy in Mauritius
	Maritime Zones Act 2005	To enact UNCLOS
	Ports Act of 1998	Established the Mauritius Ports Authority
	Fisheries Act of 2023	Sustainable use of fisheries
Seychelles	Seychelles Maritime Safety Authority Act 2019	Established the Maritime Safety Authority
	Seychelles Maritime Zones Act 1999	Framework for maritime zones
	Merchant Shipping Act 1995	Established the Port and Marine Services Division
Madagascar	Fisheries Act 1993	Created local advisories of fisheries
	Decree 2020-137 of 2010	Regulates Integrated Coastal Zone Management
	Decree 63-131 of 1963	Limits the Territorial Sea
Comoros	Merchant Shipping Act 2000	Established the Comoros Maritime Administration
	Maritime Zones Act 82-005	Delimitation of maritime zones

Along the Atlantic coast, maritime legislation in the DRC primarily concerns navigation. Angola is unique in having a specialised chamber within its ordinary

court system to address maritime disputes, but despite pressure, this chamber has not become a specialised maritime court (Oliveira et al. 2024). As Namibian maritime legislation and policies are outdated and could negatively affect the offshore oil and gas industry, there is constant pressure to fast-track the Namibian Maritime Authority Bill (drafted in 2013), which aims to create a dedicated maritime regulator for safety, security, environmental protection and ship registration (Kaimbi 2026).

South Africa operates under a complex statute-heavy, court-driven system, shaped by maritime, environmental and socio-economic laws and policies (see Table 12.1). This regulatory framework is continuously evolving to address emerging maritime challenges and opportunities (MLASA 2026; SAMSA 2025). For example, following extensive inter-departmental consultations, the second draft regulations for environmental management of offshore ship-to-ship transfers were published on 27 June 2025 (DFFE 2025a). These aim to mitigate environmental risks emanating from offshore ship-to-ship transfers associated with increased maritime traffic around the coast.

Along the Indian Ocean coast, experts in Mozambique caution that the lack of enforcement capabilities and financial independence will hamper implementation and the rule of law in the maritime sector (Bove and Justino 2025). Tanzania's maritime legislation faces challenges due to dual legislation (on the mainland and in Zanzibar), administrative inefficiencies and coordination gaps among various maritime authorities (Chegere, Ngongi and Gurumo 2024).

The Indian Ocean island states represent a mixed bag. Mauritius has a comprehensive, modern legislative framework aimed at the sustainable use of marine resources. It is regularly updated to align with international standards (Nairobi Convention n.d.). Maritime legislation in the Seychelles and Comoros aims to protect the marine environment, promote sustainable development and ensure the responsible use of marine resources. Madagascar's maritime legislation is a blend of domestic and international regulations to manage its vast maritime spaces.

The plethora of laws and policies in Table 12.1 depicts a work in progress to strengthen maritime security through integrated national governance, regional cooperation and international partnerships. Even though SADC has the IMSS in place to harmonise regional maritime security efforts, regional coordination and capabilities, as well as national maritime security strategies, are lacking. Individual countries generally address maritime security through law enforcement processes, defence strategies, port security programmes and other regional initiatives such as the AU Integrated Maritime Strategy 2050.

Table 12.1 also shows that most SADC member states have established legislation and institutions to govern maritime safety and security. These bodies manage a wide range of functions, including safety and security, pollution prevention, law enforcement, customs and international compliance. In addition, they regulate maritime traffic, port authorities, fisheries and environmental agencies.

SADC member states co-operate through bilateral, regional, interregional and international maritime frameworks to enhance maritime security and sustainable ocean management. Key initiatives include the Benguela Current Convention (2013), which fosters cooperation between Angola, Namibia and South Africa on sustainable ecosystem management of all maritime areas under national jurisdiction. It is supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the largest multilateral global environmental fund (Benguela Current Commission 2026). In the Indian Ocean, all littoral states participate in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), while the island states also engage with the Indian Ocean Commission. The purpose is to collectively co-ordinate trade, blue economy development, fisheries management and MDA (IORA 2026; IOC 2019).

Combatting illicit activities in the Indian Ocean is further reinforced by information sharing and capacity-building under the Djibouti Code of Conduct (IMO 2017), while on the Atlantic side, Angola and the DRC are aligned with the Yaoundé Code of Conduct to address maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea (Heads of State of West and Central Africa 2013). In addition, cooperation with the IMO ensures SADC's alignment with international maritime regulatory frameworks (IMO 2022). While these mechanisms facilitate important capacity building, cooperation and information sharing, they are peripheral to the core focus of this discussion.

Navies, coast guards and state-sponsored maritime security apparatus

Navies perform core roles in maritime warfare and defence through naval combat operations, the protection of SLOC, power projection and the safeguarding of maritime resources. Beyond combat functions, they contribute to national security through diplomacy, search and rescue, hydrographic services, scientific research and disaster response across the surface, subsurface and aerial maritime domains (Blaine and Nel 2019). As naval mandates have broadened to include maritime security operations, disaster relief, environmental protection and the

safeguarding of ocean economic assets, adjustments in operational, strategic and policy planning are required. These changes are also reshaping force design, doctrine, capabilities, governance and diplomacy (Bueger 2015).

Table 12.2: State of SADC maritime forces. Source: Compiled by the authors from DefenceWeb 2026.

Country	Navy/Coast Guard	Primary Roles	Platforms/ Equipment	Operational Capacity
DRC	Brown water navy	Inland waterways, limited sea capability	River/lake patrol craft, coastal patrol assets	Low
Angola	Navy-centric	Protect offshore oil, territorial defence, maritime patrol	Patrol vessels, fast attack craft, OPVs, coastal radar	Moderate to high
Namibia	Small navy performing coast guard functions	Fisheries enforcement, EEZ patrol, Search and Rescue (SAR)	Patrol boats, OPVs, small craft	Moderate
South Africa	Navy-led, multi-agency model (no coast guard)	Naval defence, EEZ patrols, maritime security, SAR, support to civilian agencies	Frigates, submarines, OPVs, IPVs, maritime helicopters, coastal radar, AIS	High (regional blue water)
Mozambique	Hybrid system (navy, maritime police, state security)	Coastal security, fisheries protection, port and offshore protection	Patrol boats, interceptor craft, limited aviation, radar	Low to moderate

Country	Navy/Coast Guard	Primary Roles	Platforms/ Equipment	Operational Capacity
Tanzania	Navy and maritime police units	Coastal patrol, border control, fisheries protection, SAR	Patrol vessels, small craft	Low to moderate
Madagascar	Navy-led with limited coast guard capacity	Coastal patrol, fisheries protection, SAR	Patrol boats, small craft	Low
Mauritius	National Coast Guard under police	EEZ enforcement, SAR, counter-smuggling, fisheries protection	OPVs, patrol boats, aircraft, UAVs, radar	Moderate to high
Seychelles	Strong coast guard with a light naval role	EEZ surveillance, counter-piracy, fisheries protection, SAR	OPVs, patrol boats, maritime patrol aircraft, UAVs	High
Comoros	Minimal (police/ navy)	Coastal policing, SAR	Small patrol boats	Very low

As shown in Table 12.2, South Africa maintains the most advanced navy in the region, with frigates, submarines, inshore patrol vessels and a well-developed maritime command and control structure. Instead of a single coast guard service, it relies on a multi-agency model involving the navy, police, environmental authorities and maritime safety agencies.

Angola has a growing navy geared towards offshore oil protection and wider Atlantic maritime security. Namibia, by contrast, operates a compact navy primarily tasked with fisheries protection and maritime law enforcement, supported by civilian agencies.

Tanzania and Mozambique maintain small fleets, oriented toward coastal patrol, EEZ surveillance, and regional cooperation. Given its extensive coastline and offshore resource interests, Mozambique has moved toward a coast-guard-type model, integrating naval and police maritime units. Tanzania likewise uses a combination of naval forces and maritime police to enforce fisheries, immigration and related laws. For the island states, the core focus is on fisheries protection and securing coastal regions.

Across several SADC states, coast guard functions are shared among navies, marine police units, fisheries inspectors and port authorities. While this creates fragmented governance, it also represents pragmatic hybrid models geared to national circumstances. Importantly, as the right-hand column in Table 12.2 highlights, the availability of naval hardware does not necessarily translate into operational capability and capacity.

Non-state actors in maritime security

Although naval and coast guard institutions constitute the primary instruments of maritime enforcement within SADC, non-state actors increasingly shape the region's maritime security landscape in both constructive and destabilising ways. These actors often operate across maritime domains and include commercial stakeholders, civil society organisations, private security providers, research institutions, and transnational criminal networks (Liss 2020).

Commercial maritime stakeholders play a central role in supporting MDA and regulatory compliance. Shipping companies, port authorities, offshore energy operators, fisheries enterprises and private terminal operators are integral to vessel traffic management, cargo screening and the implementation of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. Major regional ports, including Durban, Maputo, Walvis Bay and Port Louis, rely substantially on private logistics and maritime service providers to maintain security standards and operational continuity. Offshore oil and gas operators in Angola and Mozambique, as well as fisheries operators in Namibia and Mauritius, frequently invest in private surveillance and protective measures within their EEZs, often coordinating with state authorities through reporting mechanisms and joint monitoring arrangements (Vreÿ and Mandrup 2015).

Private maritime security companies significantly bolstered counter-piracy efforts in the Western Indian Ocean, particularly at the peak of Somali piracy. No vessel carrying private security has ever been successfully hijacked. However, their deployment in high-risk areas introduced complex legal and regulatory challenges regarding rules of engagement, armaments and jurisdictional accountability—areas in which SADC member states exhibit uneven regulatory clarity (Bueger and Edmunds 2017). While effective, private security remains costly and is constrained by international law, which creates tension between operational efficacy and long-term legal integration.

Beyond the commercial sphere, civil society and environmental organisations (such as maritime research institutes, training academies, environmental organisations and community fishing associations) bolster capacity building, governance reform and surveillance reporting. However, the positive contribution of non-state actors is often countered by transnational criminal networks. These illicit groups exploit governance gaps and limited patrol capabilities to engage in piracy, narcotics trafficking, human smuggling, illegal fishing and insurgent-linked maritime logistics. Consequently, non-state actors function as both force multipliers and risk multipliers, a duality that underscores the urgent need for integrated, multi-stakeholder maritime security governance within SADC (Liss 2020; Bueger and Edmunds 2017).

RESPONDING TO MARITIME INSECURITY

Maritime insecurity in the SADC region is exacerbated by uneven responses from member states, driven by significant disparities in capacity, capability, surveillance systems and resources. While countries such as South Africa maintain comparatively advanced naval assets, infrastructure and MDA capabilities, others face more constrained budgets, outdated equipment and persistent personnel shortages. These imbalances create enforcement and surveillance gaps across the region, enabling illicit activities to persist. Although progress has been made in strengthening cooperation and developing strategies, the pervasive unevenness in national capabilities continues to hinder the effectiveness of SADC's maritime security responses (Walker 2019; Walker 2025).

A useful African example of a successful response to maritime insecurity comes from the Gulf of Guinea. The remarkable decline in piracy and maritime crime, from 81 incidents in 2020 to 18 in 2024, was the cumulative result of strengthened regional cooperation between states and maritime security structures, institutional consolidation and enhanced naval presence (Gard

2025). States in the region deepened collaboration through mechanisms such as the Yaoundé Code of Conduct, aimed at reducing and managing the adverse effects of piracy, IUU fishing, maritime crimes and illicit activities in the Gulf of Guinea through intelligence sharing and coordinated naval patrols across national boundaries (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel 2023).

The most visible naval contribution South Africa has made to regional maritime security within SADC is the anti-piracy deployment of the SA Navy, Operation Copper, in the Mozambique Channel. It commenced in 2011 after Somali pirates attacked two vessels off Mozambique and hijacked a Mozambique-flagged fishing trawler (Martin 2014). The SA navy's only combat incident occurred in April 2012 when the *SAS Drakensberg* assisted the European Union Naval Force by preventing a suspected pirate vessel from escaping. The operation is seen as largely successful in preventing the southward spread of Somali-linked piracy. South Africa carried most of the burden alone, reinforcing the perspective that the SA Navy is the 'solely credible naval force in the SADC region' (Ndawana 2022: 170). President Ramaphosa authorised the extension of Operation Copper to the end of March 2026. However, due to limited resources, ageing vessels, a shrinking fleet and maintenance challenges, sustainability remains a challenge (DefenceWeb 2025).

SADC states, as signatories to UNCLOS, bear a collective responsibility to ensure maritime security and the safe passage of vessels through their waters. This responsibility is reinforced through frameworks which emphasise cooperative maritime security and the protection of SLOC. Many regional states face persistent challenges in fulfilling these obligations due to limited capacity, such as insufficient and inefficient naval and coast guard assets, ageing platforms and constrained financial resources, which undermine effective maritime presence, awareness and enforcement (ACCORD 2017; Martin 2021). These shortcomings are aggravated by capability gaps such as weak institutional coordination, limited technical expertise and inadequate MDA systems, which collectively hinder the achievement of maritime security objectives (Bueger 2015; Centre for Maritime Law and Security 2023). As a result, there remains a significant gap between maritime obligations and the practical ability of SADC states to govern and secure their maritime domains.

The 2008 pledge of SADC ministers to combat the scourge of IUU fishing has evolved into the MCSCC, designed to improve regional cooperation through information sharing, fisheries data, vessel registration, observer coordination, legal support, enforcement capabilities and capacity building (SADC

Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre 2026b; Stop Illegal Fishing 2023b). Scheduled to become operational in 2026, the Centre represents a significant step towards addressing maritime insecurity, though its effectiveness will depend on sustainable funding, strong political commitment, real-time data exchange, robust operational capacity and a willingness to take decisive action.

The impact of climate change, anthropogenic factors, poor governance and unsustainable ocean management, are closely linked to maritime security challenges in the SADC region. Consequently, greater emphasis should be placed on a 'whole of ocean governance' model that integrates security, environmental management and social inclusion to more effectively address the multifaceted threats to blue economy growth and development (Potgieter 2018).

Inadequate port security remains a critical vulnerability that must be addressed across the SADC region. The Port of Douala, Cameroon, offers a valuable blueprint, with traditional security augmented by drone surveillance, biometric access controls and specialised staff training (Africa Security Analysis 2025). For SADC member states to secure this vital economic pillar, they must adopt a rigorous, multi-pronged approach that combines technological solutions with robust law enforcement, improved human capacity and the requisite institutional and political will (Africa Security Analysis 2025).

The use of technology can greatly augment the capacity of SADC member states. Unmanned systems, including aerial and surface drones, substantially enhance maritime surveillance, reconnaissance and patrol capabilities by enabling persistent monitoring at reduced cost and risk to personnel. Satellite-based platforms further strengthen MDA through real-time vessel tracking, Automatic Identification System (AIS) monitoring and detection of anomalous behaviour across extensive EEZs (Bueger and Edmunds, 2017). Coastal radar networks and distributed sensor arrays contribute to multi-layered surveillance architectures capable of identifying illicit maritime activities, including piracy, trafficking and IUU fishing (Klein 2011). Integration of information from drones, satellites and sensors into networked command-and-control systems improves operational coordination and decision-making efficiency (Till [2004] 2018). Remotely operated and precision-enabled weapon systems further enhance deterrence and response effectiveness while reducing reliance on large surface fleets. For developing maritime states, particularly within the SADC region, the adoption of such technologies partially mitigates limitations in fleet size and manpower, thereby reinforcing monitoring, enforcement and maritime governance capacity.

While emerging maritime threats often fall outside traditional naval mandates, navies remain essential for supporting broader security responses. The current absence of a major incident does not absolve states from preparing for wide-ranging future risks. Persistent cyberattacks underscore the urgent need for systemic resilience, countermeasures and collective action. Although the AU has prioritised cybersecurity through the 2014 Malabo Convention and in Agenda 2063, progress has stalled (Sime 2023). Only fifteen states have ratified the Malabo Convention, with Angola and Namibia as the sole SADC signatories (Sheik 2023). To bridge these gaps, maritime cybersecurity must be formally integrated into the AU's peace and security architecture, and included in the review of Africa's 2050 Integrated Maritime Strategy (Reva 2020). Given the borderless nature of digital threats, SADC states must align their national frameworks with both global standards and AU-led regional initiatives.

Addressing maritime insecurity in the SADC region requires a shift in how defence budgets are allocated and managed. Spending needs to be more strategic, guided by a rigorous assessment of the most pressing capability and capacity gaps to address maritime insecurity. Due to multiple emerging threats, targeted investment is required in cybersecurity, drone defence and advanced surveillance capacity. But defence budgets should go beyond equipment procurement and aim at building sustainable capacity by empowering local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to supply components, develop drone technologies and provide specialised training. This will strengthen resilience, reduce reliance on external investments and suppliers, and stimulate local innovation (see relevant notes on defence budgets and prioritisation in Coetzee 2025; Walker 2025; Mafwila 2023). Although these are not quick fixes, a smarter, needs-driven approach to resource allocation with an emphasis on technology and local capacity will, over time, ensure a more robust response to maritime security.

Within the SADC context, non-state actors can act as force multipliers, either mitigating risks or exacerbating maritime insecurity. Although private security companies contribute to port security and anti-piracy operations, amongst others, their effectiveness is constrained by legal and jurisdictional compliance, specifically in environments where transnational criminal networks exploit weak governance (Mafwila 2023: 17). The dominance of multinational and state-owned companies in resource extraction links commercial and national interests with geopolitical agendas, creating potential security dilemmas amid growing militarised competition (Walker 2019: 55–56). This dichotomy emphasises the need for integrated, cooperative multi-stakeholder governance frameworks, seeking holistic solutions rather than purely security-based responses (Blaine and Nel 2019: 116; Ndawana 2022: 172, 178).

SADC and many of its members have established frameworks to address maritime insecurity, yet its ability to adequately and consistently respond to maritime security challenges across the whole region is hampered by perpetual shortcomings. These are primarily weak national capabilities, limited coordination and a lack of sustained political will. Regional initiatives such as the IMSS, joint patrols and the soon to be operational MCSCC, amongst others, show potential for effective mitigation, but the reality is that they are often reactive, not proactive, and constrained by uneven commitment from member states.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The SADC maritime domain faces complex security challenges, including depleted ocean resources, vulnerable ports, environmental risks and cybersecurity breaches, across largely unpoliced waters. Although many national and regional responses are ongoing and capacity remains limited, managing the critical interconnectedness between blue economy development, governance and maritime security is crucial. Effective maritime governance in the SADC region is increasingly important due to the potential of the blue economy, evolving threats, the need for environmental protection and rising international trade. Although key regional frameworks and institutions, such as the SMC, the IMSS, the IUU fishing MCSCC and other frameworks provide structure, implementation gaps remain. This is mainly due to weak regional coordination and governance, fragmented policy frameworks, a lack of strategic clarity, limited regional MDA and resource and capacity disparities among member states.

Legislative and institutional capacity for maritime governance is inconsistent and varies considerably across SADC states. While some countries have modern frameworks, others struggle with outdated laws and weak enforcement mechanisms. Non-state actors, such as private security companies, commercial stakeholders and civil society, play growing roles in enhancing surveillance, but as transnational criminal networks exploit gaps, it also introduces new risks. Persistent disparities in naval and surveillance capabilities limit the potential effectiveness of regional maritime security responses. Although initiatives such as Operation Copper and the new Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Coordination Centre show progress, responses remain uneven and essentially reactive. Lessons from successes in other regions, such as the Gulf of Guinea, underscore the need for sustained cooperation, intelligence sharing and integrated governance approaches. In essence, stronger political commitment and multi-stakeholder collaboration are essential for effective and sustainable maritime security in the SADC region.

Oceans are crucial to socio-economic growth and development in the SADC region as they contribute significantly to GDP and food security. But they are increasingly threatened by climate change, poor governance, unsustainable ocean management and maritime insecurity. Anthropogenic pressures, such as overharvesting and pollution, are detrimental to ocean ecosystems, heighten insecurity and undermine the ability of communities to benefit from ocean wealth. This highlights the need to broaden the traditional definition of maritime security to include global warming and ocean health, reflecting the diverse interactions between human and non-human processes through which ocean regions are constituted.

The current realities of the Indian and Atlantic Ocean coasts of the SADC region were shaped by distinct historical legacies: a trans-Atlantic legacy along the Atlantic Ocean coast, and a Swahili cultural legacy along the Indian Ocean coast. Both are strategically vital to global trade, resource-rich and prone to maritime insecurity, but this divergence necessitates a nuanced approach to regional maritime vulnerabilities. Addressing maritime insecurity in the SADC region therefore calls for more strategic, needs-based defence funding allocations, sustained and resilient maritime capabilities, technologically advanced surveillance and response systems, enhanced cybersecurity frameworks, strengthened intelligence sharing mechanisms and improved coastal infrastructure and port security. Beyond such measures, it is crucial for SADC to improve regional cooperation through harmonised legal frameworks and joint operations to ensure that wide-ranging maritime threats can be addressed in a more integrated manner, in line with the intent of the SADC IMSS. By improving collaboration with international partners and private stakeholders, specifically in the fisheries and shipping sectors, collective MDA and the capacity to respond could be improved.

Although SADC has demonstrated a capacity for sporadic and reactive responses to maritime insecurity, its current ability to provide perpetual and fully adequate maritime security is limited by inherent systemic deficiencies. Long-term maritime security in the region also depends on overcoming seablindness, enhancing political commitment, clarifying strategic objectives, and securing consistent funding to effectively implement regulatory frameworks and strategies. Ultimately, safeguarding the region's maritime economic potential requires building a proactive rather than reactive regional maritime security architecture and sustainable ocean governance.

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