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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