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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