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 is 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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