CHAPTER TEN

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

WHY DO COUNTRIES JOIN THE BRICS GROUPING?

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

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

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

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

Multipolarity and Global South agency

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

Economic and strategic weight

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

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

Population and coastal factors

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

Strategic influence and maritime chokepoints

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

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

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

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

BRICS+ AS A MARITIME ENTITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALTERNATIVE OUTLOOKS: COMBINING OR MERGING BRICS+ AGENDAS

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

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

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

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

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

MAKING THE CASE FOR A BLUE BRICS+

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

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

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

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

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

AFRICA IN BRICS: MEMBERSHIP AND PARTNERING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSIONS

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

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

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

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