



The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region

Frédéric Grare · Jean-Loup Samaan

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ISBN 978-3-030-91796-8 ISBN 978-3-030-91797-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91797-5>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the outcome of a long process initiated a decade and a half ago when we met and worked together at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs of the French Ministry of Defense. Both of us already had a familiarity with parts of the Indian Ocean region, but interestingly, not the same ones. We started by editing a special issue of the French geopolitical journal *Hérodote* dedicated to the Indian Ocean that came out in 2011. In the following years, this first experience led to a series of publications, never together, never from the same perspective, before each of us went his own way and deepened his understanding of the region.

Several years later, while one of us was leaving Washington and the other one moving to Abu Dhabi, we decided to join forces to produce a book on the entire Indian Ocean region. Over these years we have tried to complement our respective perspectives on the region, constantly working from geographically very distant locations.

In the meantime, the Indian Ocean region has considerably evolved, both under the influence of internal and external factors. These Indian Ocean dynamics, by no means a finished process, constitute the object of the present volume. Like the region, our understanding of the region is still developing. We have tried to capture the said dynamics without pretending to have always done justice to all of them and we confess that we are still students of the region.

Like every book, this one owes a debt of intellectual gratitude to many friends, colleagues and various interlocutors met in seminars or informal

meetings, who have inspired the authors, through their publications, public interventions, but often just by the sheer value of their conversations. We would like to thank in particular, David Brewster, Abhijit Singh, Darshana Baruah, Jane Chan, Collin Koh, Nathalie Shambi, Raja Mohan, Shivshankar Menon, Jonathan Fulton, Chris Colley, Mara Karlin, Abraham Denmark, Toshi Yoshihara and Nilanthi Samaranayake.

To all of them many thanks for their ideas and perspectives. Many of the ideas expressed in the book were theirs. The writing though was ours and with it the potential flaws of this book.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFRICOM	US Africa Command
ALINDIEN	<i>Amiral Commandant de la Zone Maritime de l'océan Indien</i> (Commander of the Maritime Zone for the Indian Ocean)
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CENTCOM	US Central Command
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
EEZZ	Economic Exclusive Zone
EU	European Union
FAZSOI	<i>Forces Armées de la zone sud de l'océan Indien</i> (French Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone)
FDPA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
FFDJ	<i>Forces Françaises stationnées à Djibouti</i> (French Forces in Djibouti)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INDOPACOM	US Indo-Pacific Command
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas

MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLA	People's Liberation Army
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SABIC	Saudi Basic Industries Corporation
SARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



Introduction

The Indian Ocean has long been this “neglected ocean”, almost marginal compared to the global centres of powers in the East and the West (*Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2010: 1). For a long time, it was hardly perceived as strategically relevant, and the region attracted only limited attention from scholars and policymakers in contrast to the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The region was politically fragmented, with no common threat capable of mobilizing the littoral states around a few significant poles.

The expression “Indian Ocean” is said to appear in the early sixteenth century and derives from the Roman translation of “region of the Indus River” (Alpers, 2014: 4–5). Noticeably, ancient Greece called it the Erythraean Sea (Casson, 1989). In the modern era, the terminology led scholars and practitioners to emphasize the link between the Ocean and India. In his book *India and the Indian Ocean*, published in 1945, K.M. Panikkar, an influential Indian scholar turned diplomat, claimed that India was shaping the character of the Indian Ocean.

Panikkar established the idea of the Ocean as an extension of the country’s interests: “the future of India has been determined not on the land frontiers, but on the oceanic expanse which washes the three sides of India” (Panikkar, 1945: 7). Today, Panikkar’s belief has become salient in Indian strategic circles but for a long time, this link between India and its

Ocean was purely symbolic and hid a surprising neglect from the authorities in Delhi regarding issues of maritime trade and sea power (Berlin, 2006; Brewster, 2010, 2014).

In fact, the idea of conceptualizing the Indian Ocean region (IOR) as a geopolitical space, has usually been dismissed by scholars such as Pierre Chaunu who debunked “the false concept of unity in the Indian Ocean” (Chaunu, 1979: 218). In 1966, Alastair Buchan, the then-director of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, wrote that “the Indian Ocean is from the strategist’s point of view simply a body of water surrounded by land, and not a strategic nexus” (Buchan, 1966: 186). The IOR would be too broad and its political entities too different to fall under a unifying framework.

This situation started to evolve at the turn of the millennium as a result of the spectacular economic growth of India and China. India had been dependent on Persian Gulf energy supplies for a long time, but China became a net importer in the mid-1990s, a phenomenon with direct implications for both countries and their policies towards the Indian Ocean. This led India to refresh its strategic perspective. Traditionally, threats to India’s national security had always come from land. With China’s navy broadening the scope of its missions to look at distant regions such as the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, the Indian Ocean suddenly took a new strategic significance.

In 2008, the rise of piracy attacks near the coast of Somalia temporarily brought the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) into the limelight. Piracy, and the subsequent efforts from the international community to curb its flow had another, indirect, effect which did change perceptions dramatically. To engage China militarily, the US invited Beijing to contribute to the counter-piracy maritime operations. At first, the Chinese response took the form of a modest deployment of warships in the Horn of Africa that coordinated their presence with other navies involved in the counter-piracy efforts (Kaufman, 2009). Quickly though, this unprecedented foray of the Chinese navy in distant waters led to a steady projection of Chinese military power way beyond its shores, a phenomenon that would eventually culminate with the building of a Chinese base in Djibouti in 2017.

Admittedly, these projections were in no way comparable to those observed in the Pacific or the South China Sea. China has indeed no territorial claims in the Indian Ocean. They were nonetheless a departure from the relative absence of China in the region in previous decades.

The regional powers therefore anticipated a Chinese threat, in the continuity of the dynamics observed in the seas adjacent to the Middle Empire. Chinese ambitions in the region suddenly felt ubiquitous and were no longer the product of mere speculation by US military planners. Consequently, the Indian Ocean was now portrayed as the potential centre of future competition between great powers.

As a result, by the end of the 2000s, China's global growth had triggered a new interest in the Indian Ocean among scholars and policymakers. But this interest in the region was limited and primarily driven by the strategies of external players, namely China and the US. In op-eds, policy papers or books published during that period, the Indian Ocean was generally depicted as a mere assembly of littoral states with no unity (Kaplan, 2010). The region was solely defined by the potential power game between China and India, with the US as a potential arbiter, or as the "offshore balancer", to use Christopher Layne's concept (Layne, 1997). In other words, the Indian Ocean only constituted a strategic topic because it was incidentally located at the intersection of a power struggle between these three global players, or what has been called a strategic triangle.

This notion of a triangle implies a systemic level of analysis, meaning that the interactions between the three countries are not simply determined at the bilateral level but as the result of multiple dynamics. A strategic triangle can be defined as "an intimate and interdependent relationship of three states whose existence creates a series of incentives and constraints for cooperation and conflictual behaviors among those states [...] each state identifies the other two as belonging to the category either of a security provider or a threat" (Paul & Underwood, 2019; Woo, 2003: 50). But given the fluctuating interactions between the three countries, this triangle should not be misread as a bipolar or tripolar regional system but rather as a more volatile set of strategic relations that shape, but do not order, the politics of the IOR. It is also this volatility that explains the limited integration of the IOR as a security community.

It marks moreover the end of any illusion regarding the possibility of an "Indian Ocean Zone of Peace". On December 16, 1971, the United Nations General Assembly had adopted the resolution 2982 making officially the Indian Ocean a zone of peace and calling the major powers to remove their military presence from the region. Initiated by Sri Lanka and Tanzania, the resolution had received strong support from India but was soon followed by the US militarization of the Chagos archipelago

and Diego Garcia. The arrival of China *de facto* makes the prospect for a regional peace approach even more remote and changes the political landscape. India, as well as many other littoral states no longer want the US to leave the region.

Today however, these views on great power plays prove unsatisfactory to grasp the reality of local dynamics and are to a large extent outdated. True, the politics of the IOR are still defined by the agendas of the three major countries involved in the area, China, India and the US. But in addition to this great power competition, new actors and new interregional relations have also emerged—in the Gulf, in Africa, or in Asia. These rising countries are now willing to use whatever strategic space is available to them to build their own economic, and sometimes, military partnerships that altogether are changing the inner logic of the IOR.

The political fragmentation that long characterized the shores of the Indian Ocean is still a reality and in fact, it enables external powers like China to find room for their own ambitions by building ties with a myriad of littoral states. But the uncertainty that accompanies this fragmentation has also led to an unprecedented—and largely unanticipated—growth in interregional relations (e.g. relations between the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf or between the latter and Southeast Asia). As a result, if the US–China–India strategic triangle can still be considered as a major driver of the regional policies, it is now compounded by the simultaneous strategies of local countries. In other words, understanding the tensions at this fault line between great power plays and local ambitions is the primary challenge for the observers of the IOR.

UNPACKING THE DYNAMICS OF THE NEW INDIAN OCEAN

One of the primary drivers of this new Indian Ocean remains the acceleration of China's global posture, which has been both a factor of unity and polarization. Arguably, China's project for the region may unify the different shores of the Indian Ocean—Africa, the Gulf, South Asia—through the implementation of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A vast—and still uncertain—network of economic corridors and port infrastructures, the BRI strengthens the connectivity between states of the Indian Ocean and Beijing. If the discussion about the BRI in Western circles has mostly speculated on the project as an instrument of Chinese expansionism, it rarely questioned its role as a tool of regional integration. Beyond the economic prospects, the BRI will eventually impact the

regional politics of these small states by linking them to Beijing's agenda. Therefore, this generates a semblance of unity with numerous countries on the African or Arabian shores of the Indian Ocean courting China with investment projects in local infrastructure tailored for the BRI.

But the BRI also engenders polarization, as India fears being side-lined in its own region by its economic and political consequences. Indeed, China's policies have triggered a new political activism from India in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi had long considered China's presence in the area with suspicion. The Look East Policy (LEP) initiated in the early 1990s had been partly a response to China's growing power and influence in Asia (Grare, 2017). However, the policy was not specific to the Indian Ocean. India's concerns suddenly increased in the 2000s with China's naval penetration of the Indian Ocean itself. Then, starting in 2014, under the premiership of Narendra Modi, India accelerated its plans to build stronger ties with partners in the region, whether in the Persian Gulf, in Southeast Asia, or in Africa more specifically through cooperation with Japan. These multiple engagements evidenced the level of concern in India regarding China's political and economic initiatives with its neighbouring countries and highlighted the reality of the rivalry between the two Asian powers.

Adding to this regional conundrum, the role of the US is unlikely to fade away although the credibility of its commitment has been somewhat under attack. The US international role in general, and towards the IOR in particular, is increasingly being questioned. US military capabilities are still, by far, the most important ones in the region but a general sense of strategic fatigue and the growing political reluctance in Washington to conduct interventions abroad eventually impact the local perceptions on the willingness and ability of the US to shape the dynamics of the IOR (Posen, 2014).

In this context, the evolution of US strategic views on the Indian Ocean and in particular the official adoption of an "Indo-Pacific" strategy by the US government after 2017 is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it reflects the growing belief in Washington that the challenges in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans are connected and therefore require a new framework for US diplomatic and military engagements. On the other hand, the Indian Ocean appears much less important in the Indo-Pacific equation than the Pacific where the actual US-China rivalry is taking place and as a result, the IOR may be treated as a mere appendix of the

Pacific theatre. As our research explains, the US remains the indispensable player in the Indian Ocean. But the uncertainty generated by its new Indo-Pacific posture and the military-economic commitment it implies for the region, are prompting local actors to simultaneously seek closer ties with Washington, and build new partnerships with other powers, such as China, to diversify their foreign policy options.

In addition to this first layer of regional politics—namely the strategic triangle comprising China, India, and the US—a new layer has added complexity to the political landscape. As mentioned above, the fragmentation of the Indian Ocean has enabled local players to cultivate their own ambitions. Through this aim, they can develop their military capabilities and initiate new partnerships to increase their strategic autonomy.

The rise of Gulf monarchies in regional affairs, in the Horn of Africa or South Asia, highlights the multiplication of local players in the strategic affairs of the Indian Ocean. For a long time, the international relations of the Arabian Peninsula were heavily influenced by the US political and military influence there, but the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council now nurture desires of strategic autonomy (Samaan, 2018). Likewise, ASEAN member states, at least those that are littoral states of the Indian Ocean, are also increasingly active. Traditional actors of the IOR like Indonesia, Malaysia are indeed developing new ambitions. Meanwhile, Australia has embarked on an ambitious revision of its own Indian Ocean policy. If a few years ago, its priorities appeared mostly in the Pacific region, Canberra is quickly becoming a consequential regional player in the IOR.

Additionally, if the littoral states of the Indian Ocean are playing a more active role, external middle powers are also pursuing their own agendas in the area. Such is the case of the UK and France which have both claimed a new role in the region, either through the deepening of bilateral ties with local countries or their activism in regional institutions.

THE ARGUMENT

In the following pages, we argue that this emerging multipolarity is the main characteristic of the “new” Indian Ocean. In other words, the “new” Indian Ocean is neither solely the battleground of a strategic triangle between the US, India and China nor a vast space of competition among local players; it is both. And this suggests a new level of complexity in the regional relationships as the trends do not consist in a mere replacement

of old actors by new ones. The regional dynamic fuelled by China's rise as well as the subsequent international reactions to that rise have generated a new arms race in the Indian Ocean but also a frantic search for new partnerships, locally and externally.

As a result, it also increases the interconnection between the various subregions of the Indian Ocean, such as the Horn of Africa, the Persian Gulf, South Asia or Southeast Asia. But this interconnection raises more questions than answers. Whereas the major risk in the Indian Ocean, ten years ago, was the one of a security vacuum—as reflected by the international counter-piracy operations of that era—the new dynamics spin a web of regional and local powers partnering and competing with each other without turning these relations into a more structured regional security system.

In that context, the security architecture of the Indian Ocean remains at best underdeveloped. The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and, in its own and more specialized way, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a forum of navy chiefs, are the only two existing pan-Indian Ocean organizations. But both are recent creations (the IORA was created in March 1997 and the IONS in 2008) and their achievements have been so far less than impressive. In fact, both are essentially talking shops. The ties they create are not binding and do not equate mutual security commitments, in a context where, moreover, local and external players cautiously weigh their options vis-a-vis the evolution of the US–China–India triangle.

Based on these findings, our book eventually questions the possibility of a meaningful security architecture, allowing for the management of the emerging tensions in the Indian Ocean. Traditional impediments to the development of a functioning regional system—lack of regional integration and culture, major power asymmetries between littoral states—still persist. The perspective on the region has therefore been partly imposed by outside players. But the objectives of both the local and external actors have changed accordingly, bringing new questions to the fore.

Can power asymmetries in the Indian Ocean region be, if not overcome at least be mitigated, and the convergence between littoral states increased so as to allow for greater cooperation? The economic, political and strategic competition generated by China's Belt and Road initiative has generated a dynamic favourable to the littoral states, and created space for the most entrepreneurial. Throughout this process, the posture of the major actors is evolving. The US is still the regional hegemon but

its motivations have structurally evolved. With its dominance being challenged elsewhere, it has less capacity and political will to act alone. It does remain the “indispensable” player though. It is still willing to provide security to the region but in a more indirect way, through partnerships with the more capable regional states. Specifically, this evolution is at the core of its relationship with India.

How these developments between major actors will ultimately influence regional stability is still an open question. If they make the current, very weak, regional institutional framework obsolete, it is not clear whether a new and strong security situation can emerge from it. Existing regional subsystems reinforce, rather than diminish the regional fragmentation. This then paves the way for a greater but still largely unexplored role of the middle powers. Arguably, countries like Australia, France, India, Japan or the UK do act as a bridge between the smaller littoral states and the US.

Ultimately, the book argues that security and stability of the IOR cannot be achieved by the construction or the strengthening of a single regional organization as the power asymmetries between the actors are likely to continue to prevent its effectiveness. The security architecture for the region should therefore emerge from the articulation of these new realities. It should be ultimately composed of diverse but overlapping structures, including formal military partnerships at the higher end of the spectrum, and a classical regional organization of littoral states at the lower one. In between, ad hoc coalitions of middle powers, involved in both structures, may ensure the gradual meshing of the Indian Ocean. This would require efforts in local capacity building, to allow the IOR countries to effectively control their own Exclusive Economic Zones. This also implies a conceptual enlargement of traditional maritime security concepts from the protection of the sea lanes of communications to the protection of the maritime spaces. But such a process would also enable a greater involvement of all littoral states, commensurate with their capabilities, to sustain this multilateral enterprise for the IOR.

Analytical framework and research method.

This book looks at the IOR not as a natural region but as a political construct. Delineating a geopolitical space implies an arbitrary decision regarding what different countries may have in common. It suggests an overarching coherence to a given area with some form of order organizing relations among these countries. But this assumption can be dismissed as a mere intellectual construct: geographic proximity does not always

mean political proximity and it may not translate into a common strategic environment nor a regional order. This methodological mistake has been characterized as the “territorial trap” (Agnew, 1994).

This explains the traditional scepticism exposed earlier on the idea of conceptualizing the IOR as a geopolitical space. But we believe that the absence of political cohesion or a common security architecture does not dismiss the IOR as an object of study. Instead, we use here the theory of “security complex” as understood by Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver to qualify the IOR as a geopolitical space gathering countries whose foreign policies share strong commonalities in terms of threats, challenges and subsequent priorities (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This analytical approach does not imply an institutionalized mechanism of governance which differentiates a security complex from a security community, i.e. a group of states integrated in order to get “real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way” (Adler & Barnett, 1998: 6). Nor does it mean that these countries are only partners or allies. According to Buzan, states that are competing between each other should not be separated but instead looked together as “their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1981: 190).

In other words, this book investigates the struggle for power in the IOR, be it at the level of great powers (i.e. the US, China) or middle and small powers (such as India, UK, France, Gulf monarchies or ASEAN countries). Because our research focuses on strategic competition in the IOR, this also means that policy issues facing the countries in the region like economic development or climate change are discussed only as long as they have implications for the dynamics of the Indian Ocean security complex.

Furthermore, this analytical approach led us to prioritize the study of state strategies. The book is structured around this idea of a growing power game among the countries within the IOR. Consequently, we do not look at social or transnational matters, though we recognize the existence of common social or religious identities across the region. Likewise, the last chapter discusses in detail the role of regional organizations, but our belief is that those are not autonomous actors able to shape the governance of the IOR on their own but at best, they are the sum of what states are willing to relinquish (or not) for this multilateral endeavour.

Because the book posits the IOR as a security complex circling around the relations among competing states, we thought of our research not as a

monograph but rather as a mosaic that arranges together national strategies and policies. Throughout the chapters, we looked at and crossed the different perspectives defended by all these stakeholders on common challenges such as maritime security, or the impact of the US–China competition on local states. This mosaic of national approaches to the IOR also underlines how the region is a different construct for each of these actors. Defining the Indian Ocean, be it in an American way or an Indian Way, then becomes an essential part of the regional competition.

To that aim, our research is based on a rigorous assessment of strategies conducted by the relevant states, looking at both their capabilities and their intentions. Concretely, our investigation relied on three types of sources that helped us evaluate these strategies. First, we compiled and studied the official documentation released, or sometimes leaked, by governments (official statements, reports, national strategies, or white papers). Then, we cross-checked this data with a survey of relevant references from reliable media outlets, either globally (New York Times, Washington Post, Defense News, Jane's) or locally (The Diplomat, Straits Times, Nikkei Asia) as well as from academic and think tank literature. Finally, the book also draws on years of participant observation. Both authors have spent decades navigating between the world of academia, think tanks and governments in several countries under study (US, France, India, Pakistan, Singapore, UAE). For this book, these experiences allowed us to conduct interviews and test ideas on a regular basis with policymakers. Some of these exchanges appear explicitly in the following chapters but often, they also informed our analysis in the background.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Based on the findings of our research, the following is divided into next eight chapters that each provides a different perspective on the security dynamics of the new Indian Ocean. The second chapter explores the advent of China's Indian Ocean strategy in the past two decades. It analyses Beijing's objectives and strategies in the Indian Ocean region as well as their impact on all other players in the area, underlining specifically how China has become both a unifying and a polarizing factor. Its Belt and Road Initiative is turning the Indian Ocean region into a great area of competition, generating a series of realignments in the process. China

has been involved in the funding and construction of several commercial and port facilities in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Kenya. It has also built a military base in Djibouti, while increasing its naval presence in the area, linking China to the Indian Ocean. All these developments signal a departure from the past rhetoric of China's peaceful rise and raise critical questions about China's intentions in the Indian Ocean.

Chapter 3 looks at India's response to the China challenge in the Indian Ocean. Although the Indian Ocean has historically been considered in Delhi as India's backyard, it was also mostly an empty one. As a result, India has multiplied, albeit with caution, its defence partnerships with local actors. It initiated a series of rapprochements with the small island states of the Indian Ocean through the trilateral initiative. Of particular significance has been India's hedging policy with countries such as Japan and France but also, and more spectacularly, with the US, a shift from the historically difficult relationship both countries entertained in the past.

Chapter 4 examines the new US role in the IOR. If the US is still a major player and by far the most important military actor, its interests in the region are essentially a by-product of its rivalry with China. Therefore, the chapter argues that Washington primarily looks at the Indian Ocean in terms of competition between major powers—namely India, and China—and tends to see other local issues and players as secondary. Eventually, this also highlights the American policy priorities: its new Indo-Pacific strategy indicates explicitly that in the security assessment of governments in Washington, friction and competition in the Indian Ocean would be primarily an extension of developments originating from the Asia-Pacific area. But such an assessment prevents the US from fully grasping the emerging trends in the area, for instance in the Horn of Africa or the Gulf.

Starting in Chapter 5, we discuss the role of new players in the IOR, first with the return of European middle powers, namely France and the UK. Paris and London still play a significant role through the development of their own partnerships. However, the Indian Ocean has been less an area of cooperation between the Europeans than a region of competition to gain influence. This eventually undermines the ambitions of countries which struggle to maintain a global status in light of growing financial constraints.

Chapter 6 investigates the rise of Gulf Arab monarchies in the area. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have indeed broadened the scope of their foreign policies and used economic investments as well as military assets to gain influence in several subregions of the IOR like the Horn of Africa or South Asia. Although these developments evidence the growth of local middle players in the IOR security complex, it also highlights how these new ambitions can stir regional instability, as evidenced by the consequences of the UAE-Qatar rivalry on the Horn of Africa.

Chapter 7 questions the evolving policies of Australia and ASEAN member states vis-a-vis the Indian Ocean. It underlines how a shift in the Australian perception of China's rise in the mid-2010s led to a revision of its regional posture and a growing investment into strategic partnerships focused on the Indian Ocean, with the US, India and France. Meanwhile we also explain how ASEAN states are directly exposed to the evolution of the IOR security complex. However, their strategic involvement is likely to remain limited because of their limited capabilities and their own dilemmas vis-a-vis China.

Chapter 8 examines the role of East African states in shaping this new Indian Ocean. It shows how most of these countries struggle to play a consequential role. Apart from South Africa, none has currently the ability to act as a maritime power. Nevertheless, given their natural resources, East African states remain the focus of attention for regional powers and therefore their challenge is to turn the power plays into leverage for their own benefit, to move from the position of mere stakeholders to become genuine power brokers.

Finally, Chapter 9 builds on these multiple perspectives to reflect on the challenge of regional governance in the IOR. It argues that the crucial challenge for the region is to turn the economic and military capacities of the local and external players into instruments of governance, instead of tools of competition. Specifically, given the proliferation of new players in the area, decision makers should not exacerbate the struggle for power but work to reinforce multilateral mechanisms of governance in the IOR. This could, and should, be done through a pragmatic and flexible approach that combines the pre-existing regional organizations (despite all their limitations) and the new ad hoc cooperation frameworks, be it at the bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral levels. Such an approach may eventually prevent the Indian Ocean from turning into the future battleground of great powers.

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