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SITUATING AFRICA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC CONSTRUCT THE ROLE OF INDIA AND EXTERNAL POWERS

ABHISHEK MISHRA

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

2050 AIMS	2050 Africa Integrated Maritime Strategy
AIKEYME	Africa India Key Maritime Engagement
AIS	Automatic Identification System
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AU-IBAR	African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States
BBNJ	Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction
BIOT	British Indian Ocean Territory
BMP	Best Management Practices
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
CMP	Coordinated Maritime Presence
CORPAT	Coordinated Patrols
CRIMARIO	Critical Maritime Routes
CRIMARIO	Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean
CSC	Colombo Security Conclave
CSDP	Common Defence and Security Policy
DCoC	Djibouti Code of Conduct
DRTC	Djibouti Regional Training Centre
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ESIWA	Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia
EU	European Union

EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUNAVFOR	European Union Naval Force
FAZSOI	French Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMCP	Global Maritime Crime Programme
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
IFC	Information Fusion Centres
IFC-IOR	Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region
IMO	International Maritime Organization
INS	Indian Naval Ship
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
IOFMC	Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime
IONS	Indian Ocean Naval Symposium
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IORIS	Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing
IOS	Indian Ocean Ship
IOTC	Indian Ocean Tuna Commission
IPEF	Indo-Pacific Economic Framework
IPMDA	Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness
IPOI	Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative
ISPS	International Ship and Port Facility Security
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
IUU	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated
LEMOA	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement

MAHASAGAR	Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions
MARPOL	International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships
MASE	Programme to Promote Regional Maritime Security
MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
MP-IDSA	Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NISHAR	Network for Information Sharing
NSA	National Security Advisor
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PM	Prime Minister
PPTF	Piracy Prisoner Transfer Programme
PSC	Peace and Security Council
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCOC	Regional Coordination of Operations Centre
REC	Regional Economic Community
REC	Regional Economic Communities
ReCAAP	Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia
RMFO	Regional Fisheries Management Organisations
RMIFC	Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre
SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication

SOLAS	International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea
TDPF	Tanzanian Peoples' Defence Force
TICAD	Tokyo International Conference on African Development
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNEP	United Nations Environmental Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States
WIO	Western Indian Ocean
WIOMSA	Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association
WTO	World Trade Organization
YCoC	Yaoundé Code of Conduct

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region “denotes a vast maritime zone, stretching from the littorals of East Africa and West Asia, across the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean.”¹ Some of the world’s largest commercial trading routes traverse these waters. “This vast geographic and strategic expanse, connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, is increasingly viewed as a global centre of gravity that engages and is of interest to many countries.”² The term Indo-Pacific is a contested concept. There is not much clarity on which nations falls within or outside this geopolitical space. Previously, for a long time, the United States’ (US) geographic conception of the Indo-Pacific tended to exclude African countries, but other countries, like India, France, and Japan, started acknowledging the centrality of African states within their Indo-Pacific strategies since the term began to gain traction.³

For some time now, “external powers have been scrambling to set up military bases and dual-use naval facilities in Africa and align with friendly regimes to protect their investments and safeguard the commercial sea lanes from piracy.”⁴ As a result, African leaders and countries have continuously voiced apprehensions about the risks of getting caught in

¹ Abhishek Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, December 2021, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/reflections-on-the-indo-pacific-perspectives-from-africa>. (Accessed on 7 November 2024).

² Ibid.

³ Alyssa Ayres, “The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Needs More Indian Ocean”, Washington International Trade Association, 31 January 2019, at <https://www.wita.org/atp-research/the-u-s-indo-pacific-strategy-needs-more-indian-ocean/>. (Accessed on 7 November 2024).

⁴ Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*.

between great power contestations.⁵ Despite taking strong stances on global issues, such as climate change and debt sustainability, African countries are increasingly being reduced to pawns in the geopolitical chessboard and mere battlegrounds for great power competition.⁶ Framing the engagement of external powers, especially the US and China, in terms of zero-sum competition over influence and infrastructure investment in the continent is counterproductive.

However, neither the African Union (AU) nor any individual African country has articulated its Indo-Pacific strategy/vision/policy.⁷ The 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050) could serve as a starting point, but individual interests, strategies, and regional efforts are also important and deserve due attention. The needs and interests of each African nation differ. While some countries may require capacity-building assistance in the form of hardware, like vessels, radars, and coastal surveillance systems, other countries require capability enhancement through training, legal reform, and skill development. Some nations, like Seychelles, depend heavily on revenues earned from tourism; Mozambique is primarily concerned with energy security and maritime patrolling of its coastal waters; Madagascar, owing to its excessive exclusive economic zone (EEZ), is concerned with illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign trawlers; and Mauritius is concerned with sovereignty, development of blue economy, depletion of fish stocks, and drug trafficking. Although these issues are not an exhaustive account of African maritime security concerns, they do serve to highlight the differing needs and requirements of the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) littorals. It has, therefore, become an imperative for African nations to clearly define their national interests

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ronak Gopaldas, "The Proxy Battle for Africa's Indian Ocean States", Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa, 22 October 2018, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-proxy-battle-for-africas-indian-ocean-states>. (Accessed on 10 November 2024).

⁷ Denys Reva, "Africa Must Stake its Claim in the Indo-Pacific", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 19 May 2021, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-must-stake-its-claim-in-the-indo-pacific>. (Accessed on 10 November 2024).

and power capabilities and undertake direct policy positions on the Indo-Pacific.⁸ Otherwise, African countries risk getting marginalised “from the very process and activities that will impact the continent’s long-term prosperity and interests.”⁹ It is indeed becoming increasingly challenging for African nations and leaders to remain neutral or non-aligned in the emerging, contested world order.

The AU has reiterated that the African continent’s maritime domain is an important vector through which the continent and its sovereign nations can achieve peace, security, and development. In recent years, “African countries have begun to realise the economic potential of harnessing water bodies and slowly shed their continental outlook.”¹⁰ “They are now adopting maritime security policies as part of their broader national security strategies.”¹¹ However, the ability of African states to exert agency when they are dealing with external partners has been limited due to capacity, capability, and funding constraints. Moreover, the maritime needs and requirements of every African state differs from the other. Small African island nations do not necessarily have the same interests or priorities as the littorals in East and West Africa. Therefore, in order for “African countries to truly reflect their developmental ambitions, they need to exercise collective agency by engaging in different multilateral and minilateral initiatives.”¹²

From an African perspective, literature on maritime security and the Indo-Pacific is very limited. Any discussion on Africa’s inclusion and

⁸ Yu-Shan Wu and Maxi Schoeman, “African States Need a Vision for Relations with the Indo-Pacific”, *The Conversation*, 28 February 2022, at <https://theconversation.com/african-states-need-a-vision-for-relations-with-the-indo-pacific-177377>. (Accessed on 10 November 2024).

⁹ Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*.

¹⁰ Timothy Walker, “From Missed Opportunity to Oceans of Opportunity”, ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 13 October 2015, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/from-missed-opportunity-to-oceans-of-prosperity>. (Accessed on 10 November 2024).

¹¹ Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*.

¹² Ibid.

role in the Indo-Pacific discourse is at a nascent stage. The maritime security aspects and challenges facing African countries situated in the WIO region have not been adequately explored in the existing literature. The scholarly debates and international responses have tended to focus mostly on piracy in African waters. Piracy has sensitised both Africa and the international community to the threats off Africa, but it has also skewed perceptions about Africa's maritime landscape.¹³ Despite that, maritime security in an African context has been increasingly assuming prominence in the African security agenda.¹⁴ There has also been a realisation of the value of the vast potential of resource-rich maritime domain by African governments and leaders. Africa's oceans and water bodies are increasingly becoming a source of economic opportunity, holding potential in fields of energy (both renewable and non-renewable), food, tourism, and transportation, linking Africa with the global economy. Therefore, this monograph aims to close the knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive overview of Africa's maritime security aspects, both traditional and non-traditional. It also endeavours to understand how African countries engage with external partners and which organisations are going to be instrumental in advancing voices on African maritime needs and priorities.

The African continent has 54 sovereign countries, with 38 of them being a coastal or island nation. There are countries on both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts. For the purpose of this study, the term "Africa" is used to indicate 10 countries that are situated in the WIO region. The WIO is a coherent biogeographic, climatic, and socio-political region comprising the western part of the Indian Ocean. It is one of the regional seas identified by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The WIO region has a coastline stretching for

¹³ Francois Vrey, "Turning the Tide: Revisiting African Maritime Security", *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2013, at <https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC146033>.

¹⁴ Abhishek Mishra, "Evolution of African Maritime Security: Imperatives, Governance and Challenges", MP-IDS Occasional Paper No. 64, October 2024, at <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/op-64-amishra-281024-1.pdf>. (Accessed on 11 November 2024).

more than 15,000 kilometre (km), a continental shelf area of some 45,0000 square km, from “Somalia in the north to South Africa in the south and covers ten countries” (Comoros, Kenya, Madagascar, the Republic of Mauritius, Réunion, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, and the United Republic of Tanzania), five of which are island states.¹⁵ These 10 countries are an integral part of the “Indo” portion within the Indo-Pacific construct. Any development in the Indo-Pacific region has a direct bearing on the manner in which activities in the maritime domain are conducted in the WIO region.

AIM OF THE MONOGRAPH

This monograph studies, analyses, and highlights the imperative for African countries in the WIO region to integrate themselves and play a constructive role in the emerging Indo-Pacific debate. It also attempts to find out the ways through which African countries in the WIO region could benefit by developing common positions on the Indo-Pacific based on shared interests and principles. Such a study is important because multilateralism matters for “African states as it gives them the best chance to pool resources and ideas to influence global decisions and ensure that their voices are factored in discussions that have a bearing on the continent’s growth and development.”¹⁶

Maritime security, especially in the context of Africa, is a relatively new field. Discussions, debates, and analyses on the subject area are a more recent development. The concept of Indo-Pacific from an African perspective has not been studied in depth. Each country situated in the WIO region has its own specific maritime interests, capabilities, priorities, and challenges. In order to understand and develop a holistic picture of these issues, the monograph highlights the following: African countries’ position/stance on the Indo-Pacific discourse; their interest, concerns, and apprehensions on developing maritime architecture in

¹⁵ “This is the Western Indian Ocean Region”, Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association, at <https://public.wiomsa.org/the-wio-region/>. (Accessed on 11 November 2024).

¹⁶ Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*.

the WIO region and their fundamental maritime security challenges; their possible contribution to the knowledge and discourse on Indo-Pacific through multilateral and minilateral forums and initiatives; and their views on emerging major power contestations and the role of external players in the region.

RESEARCH GAP

In present times, Africa's role and place in the Indo-Pacific are neither defined nor clearly articulated. However, it is important that African countries determine which specific agendas of the Indo-Pacific—maritime security, marine ecology and resources, capacity building and information sharing, maritime connectivity, and disaster management—to focus on going forward. Unless these countries can articulate their interests proactively and stake a claim in the Indo-Pacific, they will miss out on participating in the decision-making processes on maritime security issues.

In the era of the Indo-Pacific, multilateral security will be a positive endeavour for African countries. With increased capabilities, it would be prudent for African countries to act under a multilateral institution, and with a common voice, as they engage with external partners. This would help to secure their backyard and their agenda, on their terms, as geopolitical realities unfold. There are a few regional and sub-regional organisations through which African countries could exercise greater agency when it comes to maritime security issues. This would, in turn, position African countries to play a constructive role in the Indo-Pacific as equal partners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As mentioned earlier, literature on maritime security and the Indo-Pacific, from an African perspective, is rather limited. Discussions on the inclusion and role of Africa in the Indo-Pacific discourse are at a nascent stage and tend to be highlighted only by a handful of authors working at think tanks. Few examples include: articles by Denys Reva¹⁷

¹⁷ Reva, "Africa Must Stake its Claim on the Indo-Pacific".

and Peter Fabricius¹⁸ for the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa; Yu-Shan Wu and Maxi Schoeman's article for *The Conversation*,¹⁹ and Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia's 2022 journal article.²⁰ Due to the dearth of resources on this emerging subject, it is important to close the knowledge gap. There is a requirement for accounts of interrelated issues of maritime order, business and investment, role of external actors, and the need for Africa-centric security architecture to inform the many dimensions of maritime domain. This monograph will help to close the knowledge gap on this issue of vital importance.

A good starting point is a volume edited by this monograph's author, *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*, published at the Observer Research Foundation in December 2021. The volume details the stance/position of select WIO countries on the emerging Indo-Pacific discourse. Also, African countries' respective interests, apprehensions, and concerns on the developing maritime security architecture in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are explored. In addition, various contributors delineate their respective countries' views on the role of external powers in the region.²¹ Such compendiums provide a base to understand African maritime interests. This monograph seeks to delve deeper into specific aspects and recommend the possible ways in which African countries could contribute to the knowledge on the Indo-Pacific through multilateral and minilateral forums and initiatives.

¹⁸ Peter Fabricius, "Africa a Low Presence in the First Indo-Pacific Forum", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 25 February 2022, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-a-low-presence-in-the-first-indo-pacific-forum>. (Accessed on 11 November 2024).

¹⁹ Wu and Schoeman, "African States Need a Vision for Relations with the Indo-Pacific".

²⁰ Rajiv Bhatia, "Perceptions of Africa's Role in the Western Indo-Pacific: An Indian Perspective", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2022, at <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/2594345/>. (Accessed on 15 November 2024).

²¹ Mishra (ed.), *Reflections on the Indo-Pacific: Perspectives from Africa*.

Recently, a few publications, mainly books and articles in specialised journals, have started to make an appearance regarding the subject area; and the present research work has benefitted from some of the secondary sources/materials in the course of the study. International conventions, like the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS)²² of 1974, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)²³ of 1982, and the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS)²⁴ Code of 2004, have provided the legal and international basis for understanding the various aspects of maritime security.

All this has been supplemented by an analysis of six primary documents/policy positions of India and Africa pertaining to maritime security and maritime security strategies. The documents include: (i) Indian Navy's *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy* (2015)²⁵; (ii) the eighth report of the Committee on External Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Evaluation India's Indian

²² The SOLAS Convention of 1974 is considered as one of the most important of all international treaties dealing with the safety of merchant ships. The main objective of the convention is to specify the minimum standards for ships, compatible with their safety. For more, see [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-\(SOLAS\)-1974.aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS)-1974.aspx).

²³ The UNCLOS, signed in 1982, is an international agreement that establishes a legal framework for all marine and maritime activities. It helps to systemise and codify the standards and principles of international maritime law. For more, see https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

²⁴ The ISPS Code of 2004 is an amendment to the SOLAS Convention (1974/1988) and includes maritime security arrangement for ships, ports, and government agencies. The need to counter the threats to ships and port facilities after the 9/11 attacks was the main objective. For more, see <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/Pages/SOLAS-XI-2%20ISPS%20Code.aspx>.

²⁵ "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", Indian Navy, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), October 2015.

Ocean Strategy” (2024–25)²⁶; (iii) Government of India’s vision for the Indian Ocean, launched in 2015, “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR), which is now known as Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR)²⁷; (iv) the AU’s 2012 document, “AIMS 2050”²⁸; (v) the African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter) (2016)²⁹; and (vi) the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR), “Africa Blue Economy Strategy” (2019)³⁰. These vision documents, which provide the original text, have been analysed in detail with the objective of identifying mutual convergences and avenues of cooperation in the maritime domain between India and Africa.

²⁶ “*Evaluation India’s Indian Ocean Strategy*”, Eighth Report, Committee on External Affairs (2024-2025), Ministry of External Affairs, 11 August 2025, at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://sansad.in/getFile/lssccommittee/External%20Affairs/18_External_Affairs_8.pdf?source=loksabhadocs. (Accessed on 15 November 2024).

²⁷ “*English translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the India-Mauritius Joint Press Statement (March 12, 2025)*”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 March 2025 at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39157/English_translation_of_Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_the_India_Mauritius_Joint_Press_Statement_March_12_2025. (Accessed on 15 November 2024).

²⁸ “*2050 Africa’s Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy)*”, African Union, AU, Version 1.0, 2012 at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/30929-doc-2050_aim_strategy_eng_0.pdf. (Accessed on 15 November 2024).

²⁹ “*African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development in Africa (Lomé Charter)*, Lomé, Togo, 15 October 2016 at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37286-treaty-african_charter_on_maritime_security.pdf. (Accessed on 15 November 2024).

³⁰ “*Africa Blue Economy Strategy*”, African Union – Inter African Bureau for Animal Resources, AU-IBAR, Nairobi, Kenya, 2019 at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/au228027.pdf>. (Accessed on 21 November 2024).

In addition, two books related to the field of maritime security and Africa provide a compelling understanding of Africa's maritime needs and developments in its maritime domain. The first is Dirk Siebels book, *Maritime Security in East and West Africa: A Tale of Two Regions*.³¹ The author makes an important contribution to the scholarship on maritime security in this passionate and exhaustive account of interrelated issues of maritime order, business and investment, role of external actors, and the need for Africa-centric security architecture to inform the many dimensions of maritime domain. Specifically, the book presents a comparative perspective on maritime issues and problematic in East and West Africa. Since the maritime domain of the two regions cannot be defined in a uniform way, the author includes the African signatories of the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) as falling under East Africa and African country members of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct (YCoC) as constituting West Africa.

In a way, this is significant because these two regional arrangements or codes have been instrumental in laying down objectives, principles, and practices relevant for ensuring maritime security by the African countries. The book notes that attacks against merchant ships, or offshore platforms, and extensive IUU fishing are visible signs of lack of maritime security; and the African countries need to shore up their capacity to overcome the insecurities in ocean waters. These insecurities have acted as a detriment to business and investment and, additionally, the economic prospects of the coastal countries have suffered enormously. This is most distressing because Africa has huge potential in blue economy, apart from the hitherto untapped reserves of natural gas in the ocean. The author praises the vision documents, such as AIMS 2050, other blueprints, and the mandates of various regional economic organisations in regard to enhancement of capacity and capabilities in the maritime sphere. However, he also notes: "None of the RECs [Regional Economic Communities] in East and West Africa has a maritime focus, yet the established structures within those

³¹ Dirk Siebels, *Maritime Security in East and West Africa: A Tale of Two Regions*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2020.

organisations are essential for political and practical efforts to improve maritime security.”³²

The book deals at length with external actors who have driven the narrative in favour of improvements in maritime security. These actors, however, have exhibited a narrow focus on maritime piracy rather than on broader maritime security challenges. Siebels also laments that the engagement of African countries with each other has been rather limited and that the engagement with international partners has been largely based on the priorities of the outsider powers and not the local governments. Another merit of the book is the due emphasis on the role of private companies. These companies are active in security sector, but there are issues related to lack of transparency in their activities. Often, they are engaged in backroom dealings with politicians and officials. Nonetheless, the private companies can be a part of the overall strategy to improve maritime security. It is noteworthy that the author believes improvements in maritime security are likely to be more sustainable in West Africa than in East Africa. However, irrespective of the pace of change, both East and West Africa surely deserve attention, rules and regulations, investment and support, and cooperation of all the stakeholders to shore up maritime security capacity for the opportunities that lie ahead for the concerned countries.

The second book is Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Robert McCabe’s edited volume, *Capacity Building for Maritime Security: The Western Indian Ocean Experience*.³³ While the significance of maritime domain has received tremendous attention in security studies, national outlook of various countries, and development of vision documents and policy planning, the requisite focus on the strength and capabilities of coastal countries has not been studied in a holistic manner. Further, though there is an acknowledgement of serious challenges to the maritime domain, the corresponding focus on building capacity and capabilities

³² Ibid., p. 91.

³³ Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Robert McCabe, *Capacity Building for Maritime Security: The Western Indian Ocean Experience*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021.

has remained largely neglected. The aforementioned book is a collaborative effort to map out capacity building of various coastal states and regional organisations for ensuring maritime security in the WIO region. The chapters in the book are written by a group of scholars engaged in the study and research of myriad aspects of maritime order in the WIO region. The book is a serious effort to address the gaps inasmuch as it introduces the existing capacity of the states to respond to threats to the maritime order, in the form of piracy, IUU fishing, and terrorism. At the same time, the book notes that capacity and capabilities relate to the ability of the coastal states to responsibly use oceanic resources for national economic development and well-being of their population. Another aspect which has gained increased traction lately is the responsibility of the states for the conservation of marine resources and preservation of biodiversity. All these responsibilities devolved on the coastal states would require adequate capacity and a number of measures, support system, and regional and international collaborations to build capacity and capabilities.

The book contains an excellent introductory chapter by the three editors, appropriately titled “Maritime Security, Capacity Building, and the Western Indian Ocean”, highlighting the current state of affairs on major themes of this edited volume. Christian Bueger, who has emerged as one of the finest scholars on maritime security, is joined by Simone Tholens in the second chapter to chart out relevant aspects of issues and areas of capacity building from a theoretical perspective. Different chapters from the contributors assess the theme of the volume from the lens of practice and capacity-building projects from countries as diverse as Israel, Pakistan, South Africa, Kenya, and Somalia. Contributions on Djibouti and Seychelles, the two island countries having extensive coast and EEZs, are particularly noteworthy. Since capacity building of coastal countries could be supplemented by support from external actors and stakeholders, Robert McCabe focuses on “Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives”. There are also chapters on how external assistance is playing an important role in enhancement of capacities of maritime countries. The editors acknowledge that governing the maritime sphere is centred on adequate international assistance and the concluding chapter of the volume, therefore, presents an assessment of the external assistance in capacity

building, maritime governance, and security of maritime domain in the WIO region.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Maritime cooperation and maritime security can be studied from a whole range of perspectives in international relations. Cooperation amongst the nation states, whether in the global context or in regional settings, whether in pursuit of world peace or to ward off threats to sea lines of communication (SLOCs), can be studied from quite a few theoretical perspectives that have been employed to understand, analyse, and evaluate the cooperation attempted and achieved by concerned countries in any given area or domain. The realists argue that each and every nation state is motivated by its national interests while pursuing cooperation with other countries. Maritime space is traditionally studied by the realists under sea power, which mostly focuses on power projection of concerned countries. Military balance and political stability are the major themes of such a focus. Different aspects and issues related to maritime cooperation and maritime security are interrelated and interlinked, and it is necessary to throw light on the ideas and institutions of regional and international cooperation from different theoretical perspectives.

The focus of the developing maritime security architecture in the world and in its different regions has been on building a security community. The concept of security community was developed by Karl Deutsch in 1957.³⁴ Deutsch and his collaborators maintained that the concept is related to a group of states who develop dependable expectations of peace to resolve any outstanding dispute among them. There are many examples of a functioning security community. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU) can be described as security communities as both these organisations have developed highly effective mechanisms for settlement of disputes and resolution of conflict among member states.

³⁴ Karl Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Attempts are underway to understand the patterns of cooperation and convergence in African maritime space. Christian Bueger has suggested that the concept of security community can be used for this purpose.³⁵ A security community necessarily develops through regime complex. It is a standard complaint of the scholarship on maritime environment and security that theorising on good order at sea has received scant attention in the literature on international relations theory. Realists have analysed the maritime space within the framework of sea power and the liberal internationalists have focused on formal rules and international law. Bueger considers the inadequacy of theoretical perspective as “seablindness”, and he has attempted to bring in perspectives from critical security studies developed by constructivists. In this regard, he has attempted to outline the “securitisation theory” or the “security as practice” approach and has called for further research along these perspectives.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This monograph will be a useful tool for academics, practitioners, and policymakers to develop an understanding of a subject which has received scant attention thus far. Maritime security has been a long-neglected dimension of African security politics. International actors and donors have paid only scant attention to maritime threats and how regional waters and maritime borders can be policed and protected. In an African context, the sea has always been stranger than land. For the most part, Africa’s colonial legacy forced countries on the continent to look inward and neglect their coastlines. However, since early 2000 onwards, maritime security has become a priority for most of Africa’s littoral countries when “kidnappings at sea were on the rise and later in that decade when piracy off the coast of Somalia”³⁶ posed

³⁵ Christian Bueger, “Communities of Security Practice at Work? The Emerging African Maritime Security Regime”, *African Security*, Vol. 6, Nos 3–4, 2013, pp. 297–316, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19392206.2013.853579>. (Accessed on 21 November 2024).

³⁶ Denys Reva, “Ten years on, is Somali piracy still a threat?” *Institute for Security Studies*, 7 November 2018 at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ten-years-on-is-somali-piracy-still-a-threat>. (Accessed on 21 November 2024).

a major threat to international trade and commerce. The development of maritime trade today has been accompanied by multiple scourges, such as maritime piracy, trafficking in humans and weapons, and terrorism. In turn, these combinations of traditional and non-traditional security threats have exposed African countries to insecurity, corruption, loss in revenue, and degradation of ocean spaces. These challenges have been further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has complicated efforts to address some of the existential threats affecting the oceans, such as pollution, loss of biodiversity, and rise in sea levels. Therefore, it is important to recognise that security and stability of the African countries relies on a safe, secure, and healthy ocean ecosystem.

This study adds to the existing literature on India's maritime security engagements in the IOR, with a special emphasis on the WIO region that is increasingly at the centre of geostrategic and geopolitical competition/cooperation among both resident powers and non-resident, external players. The study provides an African perspective on how African maritime strategies have endeavoured to look beyond traditional challenges and threats (piracy and armed robbery at sea) and focus on non-traditional challenges and common interests of wealth creation and sustainable governance. Furthermore, this research work tries to analyse how various countries of the WIO region have responded to the growing Sino-Indian competition in African waters, and assess how the region accommodates the emerging powers and their goals.

Several countries, like India, the US, France, and Japan, now officially recognise the Indo-Pacific's geography to stretch from the eastern coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. All these countries have their own specific Indo-Pacific policy or framework. However, the African countries are yet to espouse their Indo-Pacific policies due to several reasons, notwithstanding their lack of maritime capabilities in terms of maritime law enforcement, ocean governance, and patrolling of their EEZs. The fact that both resident and non-resident powers have varied presence in the WIO region behoves the question which countries are placed to integrate more African voices within the emerging discourse on the Indo-Pacific. This study attempts to answer this question and understand what are the policy implications for India's own interest in the WIO and the wider Indo-Pacific.

ASSESSING MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

The twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a key maritime domain and a hub of global trade and energy supplies. It is predominantly, although certainly not exclusively, a maritime space. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific region, connecting Indian and Pacific Oceans, as a single strategic construct is significant. The region is a major trading route connecting Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas. Emerging economies, like China, India, Japan, and others, are increasingly dependent on the Indo-Pacific sea routes for trade and energy security. Much of the trade and energy supply is conducted through this route. Security of these sea routes is crucial. Two important maritime chokepoints—the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Malacca Strait—are located on the either side of the Indo-Pacific. Besides, there are threats due to piracy. Therefore, an open, free, and peaceful Indo-Pacific anchored on a rules-based order remains the desired goal.

“The Indo-Pacific region’s geographical boundaries stretch from the eastern shores of Africa, i.e. the Western Indian Ocean, to the western shores of America.”¹ This term is being backed by not only the US and India but also by many European, ASEAN, and African countries. The Indo-Pacific region is, indeed, fast emerging as an area of geopolitical and geo-economic competition and rivalry, as well as cooperation. The many trends, challenges, and opportunities, accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, include the need for rules-

¹ Abhishek Mishra, “India’s Evolving Role in Supporting African Maritime Security Architecture”, Center for International Maritime Security, 18 June 2025, at <https://cimsec.org/indias-evolving-role-in-supporting-african-maritime-security-architecture/>. (Accessed on 10 September 2025).

based order, rebalancing trade and supply chains, addressing weaknesses of multilateral institutions, and ensuring a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific region. The fast-evolving dynamics necessitates enhanced cooperation among the stakeholder countries.

In many ways, African countries situated in East Africa and the WIO are central to the Indo-Pacific discourse. From an African perspective, three main priorities have emerged. The first relates to growing militarisation in the region, especially in the Horn of Africa, in which countries are setting military bases, regularly deploying naval warships, and investing heavily in hard infrastructure. The infrastructural gaps in African countries does require significant investments from external partners. However, it is wrong to assume that all big-ticket investments and hard infrastructure projects are aligned with the national development priorities of African countries. The extensive foreign presence and growing militarisation of the region are a source of tension for African countries and could have a destabilising impact on the region.

The second priority relates to combatting and tackling the menace of piracy and transnational crimes. They pose a severe challenge to African countries in the WIO, given the volume of trade that moves through this increasingly significant maritime trade route. Afghanistan's opium production fuels maritime crimes throughout the WIO and provides important funding for violent non-state actors.² According to Stable Seas, "there are 19 active violent non-state actors that operate in the Western Indian Ocean region."³ The third issue of concern is ocean

² "Afghan Opiate Trafficking through the Southern Route", *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes*, June 2015 at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghan_opiate_trafficking_southern_route_web.pdf. (Accessed on 11 February 2025).

³ Meghan Curran, Christopher Faulkner, Curtis Bell, Tyler Lycan, Michael van Ginkel, and Jay Benson, "Violence at Sea: How Terrorists, Insurgents and other Extremists Exploit the Maritime Domain", Stable Seas, One Earth Foundation, 2020, at <https://www.stableseas.org/post/violence-at-sea-howterrorists-insurgents-and-other-extremists-exploit-the-maritime-domain>. (Accessed on 11 February 2025).

pollution, like “dumping of toxic waste, and emission of fumes by ships along these important trade routes”⁴ in the WIO. All these issues not only “pose significant threats, but also provide an opportunity for countries within the Indo-Pacific to engage and cooperate in a constructive manner to seek solutions”⁵ to the challenges. This has resulted in the WIO and its littoral states assuming greater prominence within the Indo-Pacific discourse.

From an Indian perspective, the concept of Indo-Pacific was articulated by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi in his address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018. The concept “calls for a free, open and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific, based upon respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and adherence to international rules and laws.”⁶ The concept of Indo-Pacific is not exclusionary, but is rather “inclusive in nature and supports an approach that respects the right to freedom of navigation and overflight for all in the international seas.”⁷ Additionally, the concept is premised upon cooperation and collaboration, given the need for shared responses to shared challenges in the region, and is premised upon the principle of ASEAN centrality. In today’s world, India’s “grand”, “military”, or “maritime” strategy are all increasingly contextualised to the Indo-Pacific.⁸ However, unlike for the US, for India, the Indo-Pacific is not in and of itself a “strategy”. It is instead

⁴ Melisa Wandia, “Tackling Marine Pollution in the Western Indian Ocean”, *Nairobi Convention*, 10 June 2025 at <https://www.nairobiconvention.org/tackling-marine-pollution-in-the-western-indian-ocean/>. (Accessed on 8 September 2025).

⁵ Mishra, “India’s Evolving Role in Supporting African Maritime Security Architecture”.

⁶ “Indo-Pacific Division Briefs”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 7 February 2020, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf. (Accessed on 11 February 2025).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pradeep Chauhan, “Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific: A Contemporary Perspective”, National Maritime Foundation, 12 June 2025, at <https://maritimeindia.org/maritime-security-in-the-indo-pacific-a-contemporary-perspective/>. (Accessed on 8 September 2025).

a “strategic geography” within which New Delhi formulates and executes a number of strategies.⁹ Each such “strategy” could reflect India’s endeavour to attain goals, whether geo-economic or non-geo-economic ones. Subsequently, to attain such goals, India formulates geostrategies.

It is important to note that the Indo-Pacific concept received much prominence in international discourse on international relations and real-world diplomacy during the period 2007–19. In the subsequent five-year period (2020–25), it lost some of its salience due to the polycrisis comprising the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and other conflicts in West Asia, which diverted the attention of governments, media, and think tanks worldwide. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a central piece of the Indo-Pacific strategy of four powers—the US, India, Australia, and Japan, as like-minded democracies in the region—too lost its significance, especially during 2025. In essence, the grouping did not lose significance in terms of strategic existence, but rather entered a period of diminished momentum, lower visibility, and structural uncertainty.¹⁰ The return of the “America First” doctrine signalled a shift towards a more unilateral, transactional approach in the US foreign policy. Consequently, the QUAD summit scheduled for New Delhi in November 2025 was deferred indefinitely. However, in spite of these challenges, the QUAD continued to operate, particularly in maritime security and through the Malabar Exercises held in November 2025, showing that it remains relevant as a tool for strategic signalling.¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Harsh V. Pant and Sayantan Halder, “The Year Gone by, the Quad’s Year of Interregnum”, *The Hindu*, 12 January 2026, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-year-gone-by-the-quads-year-of-interregnum/article70498487.ece>. (Accessed on 3 March 2026).

¹¹ Monica Verma, “Malabar Exercises Show Quad Prevails and Thrives despite Challenges”, *Firstpost*, 22 November 2025, at <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/malabar-exercises-show-quad-prevails-and-thrives-despite-challenges-13953069.html>. (Accessed on 4 December 2025).

ORIGINS OF THE ‘INDO-PACIFIC’ NOMENCLATURE

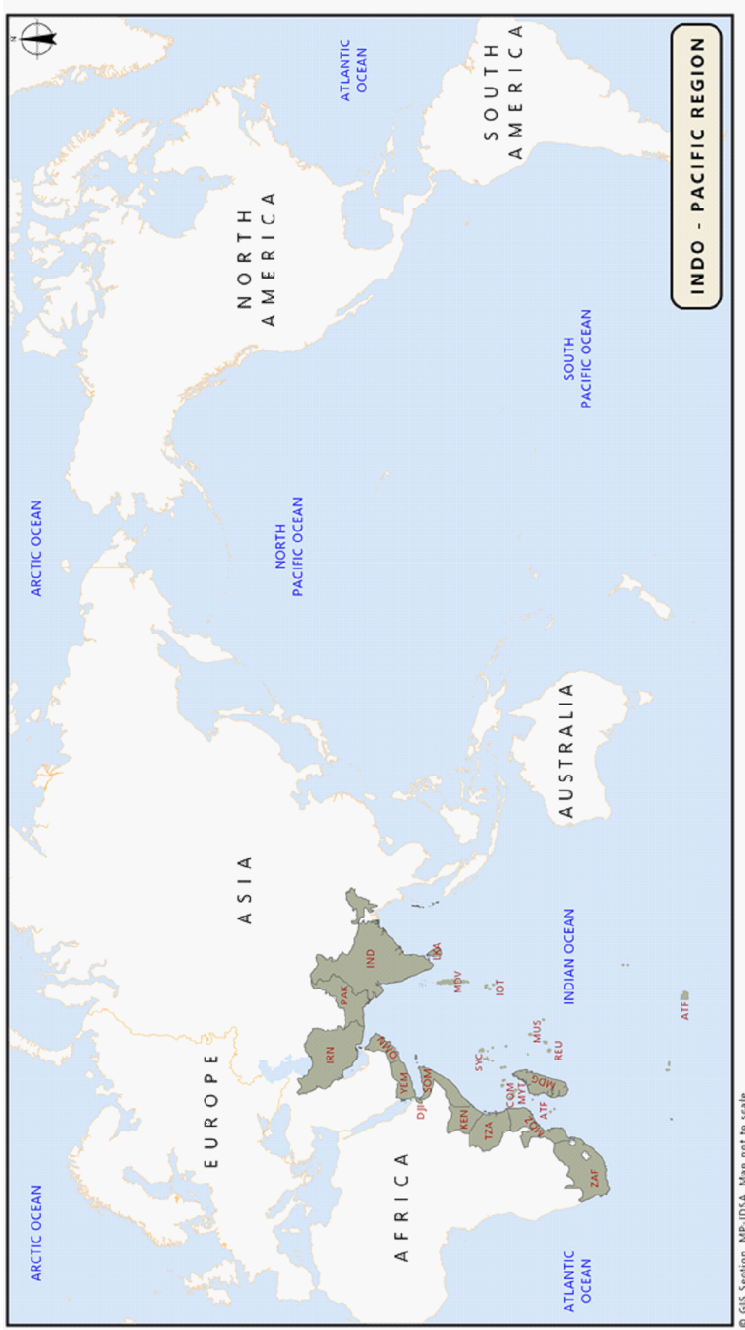
The term Indo-Pacific (*Indopazifischen Raum*) was “first coined and conceptualized by German geopolitician Karl Haushofer in the 1920s” in his work,¹² though his vision differed significantly from the contemporary usage of the term. “Recognizing the demographic and economic importance of the region”, he imagined an “Indo-Pacific (Figure 1.1) region where Japan, China and India, liberated from colonial domination, would align with Germany” in a struggle against the US, the imperialist forces, and Western Europe. Indian historian Kalidas Nag had also referred to the concept of Indo-Pacific in his work in the 1940s.¹³ Moreover, India’s first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote in 1946: “the Pacific is likely to take the place of the Atlantic in the future as the nerve centre of the world.”¹⁴

¹² Hansong Li, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’: Intellectual Origins and Visions in Global Contexts”, *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 19, No. 3, September 2022, pp. 807–33, at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-intellectual-history/article/indopacific-intellectual-origins-and-international-visions-in-global-contexts/21B142B132F694349D46CAD22EA8C7CD>. (Accessed on 11 February 2025).

¹³ T.C.A. Raghavan, “The Changing Seas: Antecedents of the Indo-Pacific”, *The Telegraph*, 17 July 2019, at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/the-changing-seas-antecedents-of-the-indo-pacific/cid/1694598>. (Accessed on 21 February 2025).

¹⁴ Abhigyan Guha, “Re-Contextualizing India in the Indo-Pacific: Decrypting the Evolution, Emerging Dynamics, and Navigating the Way Forward in a Post-Pandemic International System”, *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, Vol 2, No. 3, December 2021–January 2022, pp. 353–75, at https://www.ejsss.net.in/article_html.php?did=13498&issueno=0. (Accessed on 21 February 2025).

Figure I.1 The Indo-Pacific



In contemporary usage, the term Indo-Pacific emerged in a 2007 speech delivered by former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, titled “Confluence of the Two Seas”. He described “a partnership through which Japanese influence in the Pacific Ocean and Indian influence in the Indian Ocean, in partnership with the United States and Australia, could secure shipping routes and promote freedom and prosperity in the region.”¹⁵ Abe remarked, “We are now at a point at which the *Confluence of the Two Seas* is coming into being. The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity.”¹⁶ The speech came at a time when power shifts from the West to the East were occurring and multipolarity was fast emerging in Asia. This made frameworks/terms like the “Asia-Pacific”, which was preferred by countries like Russia and China, more limited in scope and unable to meet the dynamic and evolving geopolitical requirements of the region.

The huge transitions that shaped the Asian context have indeed led to the evolution of the concept of Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific refers to a mega-regional identity, and “any efforts to club this conceptual framework into a kind of ‘regionalism’ is inherent with its own challenges.”¹⁷ This is reflected in the fact that many countries have begun to espouse their own approach to the Indo-Pacific, albeit with “a great degree of differences in the geographical scope and extent of this concept”¹⁸. This sort of ambiguity adds complexity to the definitional

¹⁵ Ethan Teekah, “Indo-Pacific”, *Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indo-Pacific>. (Accessed on 25 January 2026).

¹⁶ Shinzo Abe, “Confluence of the Two Seas”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 22 August 2007, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pm%20v%200708/speech-2.html#:~:text=%22The%20different%20streams%20having%20their,their%20water%20in%20the%20sea.%22&text=We%20are%20now%20at%20a,of%20freedom%20and%20of%20prosperity>. (Accessed on 4 September 2025).

¹⁷ Shankari Sundararaman, “Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Historical Context and Evolving Dynamics”, 1st edition, Routledge India, 2023, p. 18, in Barbara Kratuik, Jeroen J.J. Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskolska and Yoichiro Sato (ed.) *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*. 2023, Routledge, New York.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.11.

scope of the concept. However, shortly after Shinzo Abe's address at the Indian Parliament in 2007, "the term became commonplace in foreign policy discussions"¹⁹ within the QUAD. Japan, in fact, was among the first countries to use the phrase "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) in its official discourse. In 2017, the US adopted the concept of Indo-Pacific, which marked its inflection point, through the 2017 National Security Strategy, 2018 National Defense Strategy, and 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. In 2022, the Biden administration also unveiled the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with the stated objectives of ensuring free and fair trade, supply chain resilience, clean energy, decarbonisation, and sustainable infrastructure, along with tax and anti-corruption mechanisms.

The countries that have brought out their visions/strategies/policy documents towards the Indo-Pacific share certain similarities. All these countries are democracies that have expressed concerns about the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and the potential ramifications of the US–China competition. Certain terms or phrases are also common across the different documents, like "free", "open", "cooperation", "connectivity", "inclusive", "rule of law", "international law", and "secure/security", and appear as core principles. Additionally, in all the concepts, each country acknowledges that Southeast Asia, and members of ASEAN in particular, are central to the success of the Indo-Pacific concept. They also emphasise the importance of maritime security and cooperation, and a reliance on multilateral coordination to address shared interests and common challenges. However, there are obvious differences in titles and terms applied in official speeches, which defines how these countries think of the Indo-Pacific, whether its policy-oriented "strategies" to more broader "visions" or the most nebulous "concepts".²⁰

¹⁹ Ethan Teekah, "Indo-Pacific", *Britannica.com*, 25 January 2026.

²⁰ Alison Szalwinski, "What's in an Indo-Pacific Concept? Shared Visions and Varied Approaches", *Asia Policy*, Volume 18, No. 3, July 2023, pp. 96–100, at https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/asiapolicy18-3_indo-pacific_rt_jul2023.pdf. (Accessed on 18 March 2025).

THE US VIEW ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

In February 2022, the Biden administration released its Indo-Pacific strategy, which advocates freedom and openness through regional connectivity, trade, investment, and deeper bilateral and multilateral partnership. The strategy contains five key objectives: (i) to advance an FOIP; (ii) build connections within and beyond the region; (iii) drive regional prosperity by proposing an IPEF; (iv) extend integrated deterrence via cooperation and interoperability with allies and partners; and (v) build regional resilience to twenty-first century transnational threats.

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, like the previous US administrations, identifies the Indo-Pacific region as a core interest and characterises China as one of the major challenges to continued peace and stability.²¹ Furthermore, while there is an inherent focus on strategic competition, not everything in the strategy involves hard security competition. Various non-security areas of cooperation are included, like developing clean energy, mitigating climate change, improving public health, managing governance challenges, among others. It is also important to underscore that the US does not envision itself as capable of implementing this strategy in isolation. For that, the strategy emphasises the importance of working together with key allies, partners, and regional organisations. In addition, the strategy emphasises ASEAN centrality and cites China's "coercion and aggression" as "most acute in the Indo-Pacific".²² Other national documents, like the Biden administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, also warn about growing Chinese unilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.

²¹ Jeffrey W. Hornung, "The United States: A Comprehensive Strategy with Challenges Ahead", *Asia Policy*, Volume 18, No. 3, July 2023, pp. 7–16, at https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/asiapolicy18-3_indo-pacific_rt_jul2023.pdf. (Accessed on 18 March 2025).

²² "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", The White House, February 2022, at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>. (Accessed on 12 November 2025).

Ever since announcing its Indo-Pacific strategy, Washington has made notable inroads in implementing the vision. It has supported Taiwan, prioritised the QUAD, strengthened the Australia–United Kingdom (UK)–US (AUKUS) agreement, sold Tomahawk missiles to Japan, and added four new bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with Philippines. However, the task of implementing this strategy has not been without its share of challenges. The US’ insistence on countries picking sides between it and China could be counterproductive because for many countries in the Indo-Pacific region, their national interests are best served by engaging positively and proactively with both Washington and Beijing.²³

Moreover, under President Donald Trump’s second administration, “America’s commitment to its Indo-Pacific allies now comes with higher costs, more demands and inconsistent conditions.”²⁴ On the economic front, the withering away of multilateral economic frameworks, like the “IPEF, established under Biden administration, has reduced US economic influence in the region.”²⁵ In the security domain, the US is now demanding its allies to “increase their defence budgets, focus on denial defence (moving beyond grey zone scenarios), showcase strategic flexibility, and clarify their commitments in a Taiwan contingency”²⁶ as part of Trump administration’s “Peace through Strength” approach.

²³ Hornung, “The United States: A Comprehensive Strategy with Challenges Ahead”, p. 11.

²⁴ Kanishkh Kanodia, “US Indo-Pacific Allies are Unhappy about Trump’s Defence Demands. But They have to Comply”, Chatham House, 14 July 2025, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/us-indo-pacific-allies-are-unhappy-about-trumps-defence-demands-they-have-comply>. (Accessed on 12 November 2025).

²⁵ Abhishek Sharma, “Steady Erosion of Confidence: US’s Indo-Pacific Allies Grow Uneasy”, Observer Research Foundation, 29 September 2025, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/steady-erosion-of-confidence-us-s-indo-pacific-allies-grow-uneasy>. (Accessed on 16 November 2025).

²⁶ Ibid.

Further, some reports suggest that Trump is seeking North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-like defence spending commitment of 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) from the Indo-Pacific allies, causing displeasure and anxiety among these allies.²⁷ As many of the Indo-Pacific allies of the US are heavily reliant on American security guarantees—like the NATO countries—they “must begin the process of bearing a greater burden for defending their own sovereignty”,²⁸ as also continue to keep the US military engaged in their respective countries. President Donald Trump’s 2025 National Security Strategy²⁹ signals a shift towards “flexible realism”, in which the US is prioritising economic nationalism, border security, and a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere over broader global engagement.³⁰ This shift towards the Western Hemisphere as Washington’s primary geopolitical priority bucks historical trends and narrows the definition of the US’ core interests.

Presently, the US commitment to regional security stands on shaky ground. It is clear to the country’s Indo-Pacific allies that they do not hold a privileged position in President Trump’s foreign policy. Therefore, taking on a greater burden in the alliance and drawing up long-term plans to increase defence spending could help reassure Washington that its Indo-Pacific allies are serious about defending themselves.

President Donald Trump’s current “approach towards India and the Indo-Pacific reflects a marked departure from the strategic framing

²⁷ Kanodia, “US Indo-Pacific Allies are Unhappy about Trump’s Defence Demands. But They have to Comply”.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, The White House, November 2025, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>. (Accessed on 2 January 2026).

³⁰ James M. Acton et al., “Unpacking Trump’s National Security Strategy”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 January 2026, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/01/trump-national-security-strategy>. (Accessed on 28 January 2026).

that characterised its first term (2017 to 2021).³¹ India's tariff tensions with the US due to purchase of Russian oil, the US response to the India–Pakistan conflict, and Trump's insistence on India shouldering more responsibility in the Indo-Pacific are leading New Delhi to revert to its default preference for strategic autonomy.³² With the US scaling down its strategic commitment, it behoves India to remain truly autonomous in its foreign policy strategy going forward.³³

JAPAN'S VIEW ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

Shinzo Abe, former Japanese PM, played a crucial role in articulating and promoting Japan's vision for an FOIP. Both his 2007 speech at the Indian Parliament and August 2016 speech during the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Kenya laid the groundwork for Japan's FOIP vision. This vision rested on three pillars: establish the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade; pursue economic prosperity; and commit to peace and stability. Subsequent Japanese administrations further developed and endorsed this vision. Former PM Fumio Kishida, on a trip to India, launched a revamped FOIP plan on 20 March 2023,³⁴ in which he suggested that the approach towards creating an FOIP should ideally be based on

³¹ Bijoy Sony Joseph, "India and the Indo-Pacific in Trump's Second-term Strategy", *The Diplomat*, 10 December 2025, at <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/india-and-the-indo-pacific-in-trumps-second-term-strategy/>. (Accessed on 28 December 2025).

³² Rachel Rizzo and Vivek Mishra, "Trump's NSS and India's Strategic Dilemmas", Observer Research Foundation, 26 December 2025, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/trump-s-nss-and-india-s-strategic-dilemmas>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

³³ Aparna Pande and Vinay Kaura, "How India's Role in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy Diminished", *The National Interest*, 18 December 2025, at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/how-indias-role-in-us-indo-pacific-strategy-diminished>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

³⁴ Fumio Kishida, "The Future of the Indo-Pacific", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 20 March 2023, at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100477739.pdf>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

“rulemaking through dialogue” and “equal partnership” among nations.³⁵ Japan’s new FOIP vision entails four pillars:

- 1. Principles for peace and rules for prosperity:** Due to erosion of the rule of law and unilateral behaviour displayed by some countries, particularly in the maritime domain, there is a need to collectively reaffirm and promote common principles that the international community should seek to uphold. This includes opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by force, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- 2. Addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way:** The collective needs of the Indo-Pacific region and the challenges its littorals face should be addressed through collaborative and collective means. Global common challenges, like climate change, health, cyberspace, and food supply, should be dealt with collectively, which will subsequently augment societies’ resilience and sustainability and achieve “equal partnership” among nations.³⁶
- 3. Multilayered connectivity:** There is an inherent need for diversification of connectivity projects. Japan’s focus primarily is on Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands; although Africa is also gaining in prominence slowly. In Southeast Asia, Japan supports ASEAN’s “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”; and in South Asia, it aims to promote the Bengal–Northeast India value chain concept with India and Bangladesh. Among Pacific Islands, Japan supports undersea telecommunications cable project. In Africa, Japan seeks to partner with India and establish an Indian Ocean–Africa Economic Zone to support African efforts towards regional integration and industrial development.

³⁵ Junya Nishino, “Japan’s New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ and its Challenges”, *Asia Policy*, Volume 18, No. 3, July 2023, pp. 17–25, at https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/asiapolicy18-3_indo-pacific_rt_jul2023.pdf. (Accessed on 14 January 2026).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

- 4. Efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air:** The scope of Japan's new FOIP vision has now extended to include not only the sea but also the air and issues related to ensuring the safe use of airspace.³⁷ Towards this, Tokyo seeks to collaborate with its partners to strengthen law enforcement capabilities (both human and technical) in air and maritime security endeavours.

It is important for Japan to strike a delicate balance between engaging China and upholding its own FOIP principles. Both the nations share significant economic interdependence since Beijing is Tokyo's largest trading partner and Japan's businesses have many investments in China. However, as the US–China competition intensifies, Japan is also concerned about potential military incidents in areas like East and South China Sea. Consequently, in 2025, the Japanese cabinet has approved a record defence budget of 8.7 trillion yen (US\$ 55 billion), which represents nearly 3.5 per cent of its GDP.³⁸ The possibility of China perceiving these new efforts as a threat, and subsequently exacerbating the security dilemma between the two countries, is real.

Under the newly elected PM, Sanae Takaichi, Japan's FOIP vision is likely to share similarities with the previous administrations and it is more likely that the coalition government of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)–Ishin will pursue more proactive foreign and security policies than before.³⁹ However, the task of balancing relations with China and navigating relations with US President Donald Trump is going to be challenging. It is also important to note that the Japanese government, under the ruling LDP, is now seeking to ease its decades-old restrictions

³⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁸ “Japan Signals Defense Budget Surge amid Trump Visit”, *The Asian Shimbun*, 22 October 2025, at <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/16107179>. (Accessed on 14 January 2026).

³⁹ Kazuto Suzuki, “Sanae Takaichi Sees Herself as the Successor to Shinzo Abe. But Changes in Japan's Politics Present Big Challenges”, Chatham House, 22 October 2025, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/sanae-takaichi-sees-herself-successor-shinzo-abe-changes-japans-politics-present-big>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

on military hardware exports, which till now limited Japan's military exports to five non-lethal categories.⁴⁰ Rising threats from China, Russia, and North Korea necessitate stronger deterrence in the Indo-Pacific and some reports indicate that Japan may export co-developed jets (like the Global Combat Air Programme) and components to certain allies, like the US, the UK, Italy, and other "like-minded" nations.⁴¹

FRANCE'S VIEW ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

France was the first European country to announce an Indo-Pacific strategy, launching it in 2018.⁴² Being a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, it maintains territories in both the Indian Ocean (the islands of Mayotte and Réunion, the "Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic territories) and the Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton Island).⁴³ More than 1.65 million citizens live in these territories and more than 90 per cent of its large EEZ (10.2 million square km) is located in the two oceans. France maintains a military presence of 8,000 personnel to take care of this

⁴⁰ Gabriel Dominguez, "Japan has Long had Tough Rules on Arms Exports. That may Soon Change", *The Japan Times*, 17 December 2025, at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/12/17/japan/politics/japan-arms-exports-analysis/>. (Accessed on 14 January 2026).

⁴¹ Mark Soo, "Japan Authorizes Fighter Jet Exports under GCAP", *Geopolitical Monitor*, 3 April 2024, at <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/japan-authorizes-fighter-jet-exports-under-gcap/>. (Accessed on 14 January 2026).

⁴² "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy", Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Government of France, July 2021 at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_synthese_rvb_cle068e51.pdf. (Accessed on 14 January 2026).

⁴³ "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific", Ministry for the Armed Forces, Government of France, 2018 at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcajpcgclclefindmkaj/https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/EN%20-%20Plaque%20-%20France%20and%20Security%20in%20the%20Indo-Pacific%20-%202019.pdf>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

vast area.⁴⁴ The French strategy in the Indo-Pacific “seeks to maintain an area that is open and inclusive, free from all forms of coercion, and founded on multilateralism and respect for international law.”⁴⁵

President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly acknowledged the risks of China’s rise in terms of strategic ambitions and has warned about China’s growing military spending and defence budgets. Therefore, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy has been “informed by taking a balancing and hedging approach vis-à-vis China.”⁴⁶ President Macron has argued in favour of France playing the role of a balancing power—one that is not aligned with the US but acts autonomously and offers an alternative way out of the bipolar confrontation, which is viewed as a destabilising factor.⁴⁷

At the core of France’s principle-based approach to the Indo-Pacific are freedom of circulation and respect for international law, especially at sea.⁴⁸ The implementation of the French strategy is carried out through four pillars:⁴⁹

1. **Security and defence:** This pillar deals with protecting its citizens, territories, and EEZ; preserving access to common areas in a

⁴⁴ Celine Pajon, “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: From a Balancing Power to a Constructive Stakeholder”, *French Institute of International Relations*, 27 July 2023 at <https://www.ifri.org/en/external-articles/frances-indopacific-strategy-balancing-power-constructive-stakeholder>. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

⁴⁵ “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, op.cit.

⁴⁶ Celine Pajon, “France in the Indo-Pacific: From a Balancing Power to a Constructive Stakeholder”, *Asia Policy*, Volume 18, No. 3, July 2023, 69–81, at https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/asiapolicy18-3_indo-pacific_rt_jul2023.pdf. (Accessed on 17 January 2026).

⁴⁷ “Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors”, *ÉLYSÉE*, 27 August 2019, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>. (Accessed on 17 January 2026)

⁴⁸ “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

context of strategic competition; participating in maintenance of regional stability and military balances of power through international action based on multilateralism; and anticipating security risks brought about by climate change. France carries out this task by monitoring sovereign areas, organising multilateral exercises, participating in rescue operations, and deepening interoperability with partners.

2. **Economy, connectivity, research and innovation:** France seeks to ensure diversification of the supply of strategic goods and reduce dependencies; promote existing international standards; meet connectivity and infrastructure needs; support French companies in the Indo-Pacific; and deepen research and innovation partnership. Towards this, France has implemented the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment.
3. **Multilateralism and the rule of law:** France seeks to promote multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific; foster strong involvement and better visibility of the EU; and ensure the central nature of the rule of law and primacy of the law of the sea.
4. **Climate change, biodiversity, sustainable management of oceans:** France seeks to develop partnerships for ocean protection; contribute to improving natural disaster response; and foster strengthening of actions for biodiversity. Towards this, France is focusing on solar energy initiatives, promoting the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, and mobilising countries in the region around ambitious climate objectives.

It is clear that France is following its own path in the Indo-Pacific. It is placing its bet on practising strategic autonomy within a multipolar, inclusive Indo-Pacific. This is reflected in the fact that while Paris maintains dynamic strategic partnerships with the four members of the QUAD, it has so far refused to be politically associated with the grouping.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Pajon, “France in the Indo-Pacific: From a Balancing Power to a Constructive Stakeholder”, p. 75.

France's strategic ambition of acting as a balancing power could prove to be overly ambitious since it neither has the capacity nor diplomatic weight to play such a role in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, it should seek to position itself as a "constructive Indo-Pacific stakeholder"⁵¹—one that addresses cross-cutting global issues but also remains cognisant about its capability and real influence.

THE EU'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

The EU has a strong history of economic influence, diverse member states, and commitment to multilateralism positions as a key player in the Indo-Pacific. In September 2021, the EU launched its Indo-Pacific strategy, which marked a significant step forward in defining its regional engagement.⁵² The strategy, which was backed by France, Germany, and the Netherlands, prioritises multilateral cooperation, a rules-based international order, and economic security. Due to Russia's conflict with Ukraine and the unpredictability of US President Donald Trump's administration, the EU needs to prepare itself to withstand economic shocks and disruptions stemming from escalating geopolitical tensions. Also, the task of building resilient industrial bases and securing supply chains remains paramount.

In terms of trade and investment, the EU and the Indo-Pacific are natural partners, together accounting for "over 70 percent of global trade in goods and services, and over 60 percent of foreign direct investment flows."⁵³ The 2021 strategy identifies seven priority areas:

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵² "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", European Commission, Brussels, 16 September 2021, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf. (Accessed on 12 January 2026).

⁵³ "Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", *European Commission*, Brussels, 16 September 2021 at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_4709. (Accessed on 8 January 2026).

sustainable and inclusive prosperity; ocean governance; green transition; connectivity; security and defence; digital governance and partnerships; and human security.⁵⁴ Additionally, the Global Gateway serves as the EU's overarching cooperation framework.⁵⁵ The October 2025 council conclusion on the "Implementation of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" advises that the EU should "continue and further intensify its strategic focus, presence, visibility and actions in the Indo-Pacific."⁵⁶ To uphold the multilateral system and rules-based international order, the EU is working closely with the ASEAN, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) member states.

Through its Indo-Pacific strategy, the EU also seeks to increase its efforts to enhance regional security through security and defence partnerships, regular dialogues, and participation in joint exercises, such as naval exercises. The EU naval operation, EUNAVFOR–Operation Atalanta, has conducted several successful joint exercises with the Indo-Pacific partners, including India, Indonesia, Japan, and the US. The EU Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the Northwest Indian Ocean is designed to optimise the number of assets deployed in the region by its member states. The EU also works closely with its Indo-Pacific

⁵⁴ "EU Indo-Pacific Strategy", European External Action Service, 6 November 2024, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-topic_en. (Accessed on 8 January 2026).

⁵⁵ Global Gateway initiative is a strategy by the EU to invest up to 300 billion Euro globally, by 2027, in certain areas, like digital, climate, energy, transport, health, and education. It was launched in December 2021 with the goal of creating "smart, clean and secure" links worldwide and reduce the global investment gap. The initiative is widely assumed to be the EU's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on sustainable, high-quality projects, with greater emphasis on democratic values and higher standards. For more, see https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway_en.

⁵⁶ "Implementation of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Council Conclusions (20 October 2025)", Council of the European Union, Luxembourg, 20 October 2025, at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14071-2025-INIT/en/pdf>. (Accessed on 8 December 2025).

partners under the EU-funded project, “Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia” (ESIWA), which covers different areas, like counterterrorism, maritime security, cybersecurity, and crisis management. For maritime domain awareness (MDA), the EU’s actions are framed by the Critical Maritime Route Wider Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) project and the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform, which helps to support maritime information sharing at the regional level. In June 2025, the EU and the Indian Navy conducted a joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean with the aim of improving interoperability and communication between the two naval forces, strengthening counter-piracy operations, and reinforcing a shared commitment to a free and open maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁷

Additionally, since late 2023, due to Houthi attacks, maritime shipping in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf has significantly degraded. In response, the EU has launched Operation ASPIDES under the EU Common Defence and Security Policy (CSDP).⁵⁸ With a purely defensive mandate, EUNAVFOR ASPIDES seeks to protect shipping targeted by attacks on sea and the air. It accompanies commercial vessels and reinforces maritime situational awareness through monitoring, assessing possible threats, and sharing maritime information in coordination with partners.

The articulation of the Indo-Pacific concept by various countries around the world reflects a shared concern about the shifting power dynamics and changing equations in the region, and also the direction of the US–China competition. “While each country has its own unique vision and terminology, they all emphasise core principles such as freedom,

⁵⁷ “EUNAVFOR ATALANTA and Indian Navy Conduct a Naval Exercise in the Indian Ocean”, EU Naval Force–Operation Atalanta, 5 June 2025, at <https://eunavfor.eu/news/eunavfor-atalanta-and-indian-navy-conduct-naval-exercise-indian-ocean>. (Accessed on 8 January 2026).

⁵⁸ “EUNAVFOR OPERATION ASPIDES”, European Union External Action Service, 17 July 2025, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides_en. (Accessed on 9 January 2026).

openness, cooperation and security.”³⁹ For some countries, competition with China is the primary driving factor, while others emphasise cooperative and inclusive strategies for engaging in the Indo-Pacific region.

Although there are many other nations that have launched their own visions/strategy for the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, Germany, Canada, South Korea, and Indonesia, for the purpose of this monograph, the analysis is limited to actors that can potentially play a greater role in engaging with African countries in the WIO region. India’s own approach towards the Indo-Pacific is detailed in the following chapter.

³⁹ Szalwinski, “What’s in an Indo-Pacific Concept? Shared Visions and Varied Approaches”, p. 99.

INDIA'S OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

In the twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a geopolitical epicentre of contemporary global politics. Interactions between states in the region shape the contours of global trade and security dynamics. Being an increasingly seamless, connected region that is home to more than 64 per cent of the global population and contributing to 60 per cent of the global GDP, the Indo-Pacific's maritime trade routes host about half of the global trade and facilitate two-thirds of global energy flows. The region's significance lies not only in its economic centrality but also in the intensifying geopolitical rivalries that traverses it. India, one of the first countries to adopt the concept of Indo-Pacific, views it as a region of growth, opportunities, and emerging non-traditional maritime challenges. In terms of geographical definition, India considers the Indo-Pacific region as extending "from the Eastern shores of Africa to the Western shores of America."¹

Before countries started to embrace the notion of Indo-Pacific, this region was referred to as the Asia-Pacific. The term Asia-Pacific was first coined in the US as a post-Cold War concept and tended to exclude South Asia. The shift in terminology from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" is not simply a change in nomenclature. It represents the expansion of a region into a mega-region where both the Pacific and Indian Oceans are increasingly interconnected as a single maritime unit.

¹ "Speech by External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar on 'India's Vision of the Indo-Pacific Vision' at Chulalongkorn University on 18 August 2022", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 18 August 2022, at <https://embassyofindiabangkok.gov.in/listview/MTE5OA>. (Accessed on 4 April 2025).

The transitions shaping the Asian context have led to the evolution of the concept of Indo-Pacific, particularly due to the rise of China and India.

Although there are various complexities regarding the definitional scope and extent of the context itself, it is useful to acknowledge that “each country that is now formulating their own versions of the Indo-Pacific is doing so from the compulsions of their own foreign policy perspectives.”² While some countries are trying to address the region’s economic importance and strategic significance, particularly in response to China’s rise and assertiveness, others are seeking to adhere to a “rules-based international order” and ensure respect for international law, particularly in the maritime domain.

FACTORS DRIVING INDIA’S INDO-PACIFIC EMBRACE

For India, its Indo-Pacific policy was enunciated by PM Narendra Modi in 2018 at the Shangri-La Dialogue. He referred to the Indo-Pacific as a “natural region” which is home to a vast array of opportunities and challenges. Prime Minister Modi emphasised:

India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. A geographical definition, as such, cannot be. India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific Region is, therefore, a positive one. And, it has many elements.³

For the most part, India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific has tended to focus on the eastward region, with the ASEAN being the central focus.

² Shankari Sundararaman, *Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Historical Context and Evolving Dynamics*, 1st edition, Routledge India, 2023, p. 11 in Barbara Kratuik, Jeroen J.J. Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskolska and Yoichiro Sato (ed.) *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*. 2023, Routledge, New York.

³ “Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1 June 2018, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dt1/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>. (Accessed on 7 April 2025).

However, in recent years, India has started to pay more attention to its western seaboard, with the aim of improving maritime security and developing purposeful and accommodative relationships with the country's neighbours and extended neighbours across the Indian Ocean. This region is part of India's strategic maritime frontier and includes African WIO littorals.

During his address at the 11th Delhi Dialogue in December 2019, Dr S. Jaishankar noted that "while the nations on the eastern Indian Ocean and States on the connecting seas leading to the Pacific are defining their visions of the Indo-Pacific, there is room for a western Indian Ocean version of this concept too."⁴ This stance is in line with India's view that the Indo-Pacific naturally includes India's western ocean neighbours in the Gulf, the island nations off the Arabian Sea, and also African WIO littorals.

From Jawaharlal Nehru's foundational emphasis on non-alignment and strategic autonomy to PM Modi's pragmatic, multi-aligned, and issue-based engagement with the Indo-Pacific, India's foreign policy has undergone tremendous transformation over the decades. The doctrine of non-alignment, institutionalised through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), sought to carve out an independent space for India in a bipolar world. India remained cautious about the imperative of safeguarding its security and maintaining its status and identity, while simultaneously avoiding alignment with major powers. Under this doctrine, India emphasised peaceful co-existence and multilateral cooperation. However, practicing non-alignment was not an easy task.

Whether during the Sino-Indian War in 1962 or the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, India's non-aligned stance was challenged by realpolitik. At the end of the Cold War and the 1991 economic liberalisation under P.V. Narasimha Rao, India began to embrace a

⁴ "Valedictory Address by External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S. Jaishankar at 11th Delhi Dialogue, 14 December 2019", Indian Council of World Affairs, 14 December 2019, at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=5657&lid=3126. (Accessed on 7 April 2025).

more flexible and interest-based foreign policy. India's Act East policy institutionalised this shift through which New Delhi sought to strengthen its relations with Southeast Asia in recognition of its civilisational links and economic interests in the region.⁵ Under PM Modi, the Indian foreign policy underwent an assertive recalibration and India began to focus not just on economic connectivity projects but also on maritime security and defence cooperation.

Meanwhile, China's growing assertive behaviour in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects raised concerns in India about losing influence in its traditional sphere. South Asian countries, like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, began to lean towards Beijing. Sri Lanka's lease of the Hambantota Port to China for 99 years after failing to repay its debts positioned China strategically in the Indian Ocean, right in India's backyard.⁶ Bangladesh also became a major buyer of Chinese military equipment and its markets were flooded with Chinese goods. Besides, China invested heavily in Bangladeshi ports, notably the Chittagong Port and recently, the Mongla Port, with a government concessional loan of US\$ 400 million, thereby increasing its maritime presence in the Bay of Bengal region.⁷ Furthermore, Chinese transgressions across the disputed border between India and China increased, culminating in violent border clashes in May 2020, which

⁵ Gagan C. and Santosh Kumar, "From Non-alignment to Multi-alignment: India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Shifting Geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific", *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 2025, pp. 9–16, at <https://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com/uploads/archives/7-5-47-313.pdf>. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

⁶ Jonathan E. Hillman, "Game of Loans: How China bought Hambantota", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 April 2018, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/game-loans-how-china-bought-hambantota>. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

⁷ Jayanth Jacob, "China Backs Bangladesh with USD 2.1 Billion in Investments amid Strategic Concerns Over Teesta Project", *The New Indian Express*, 30 March 2025, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2025/Mar/29/china-backs-bangladesh-with-usd-21-billion-in-investments-amid-strategic-concerns-over-teesta-project>. (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

caused fatalities on both sides.⁸ Subsequent clashes took place in January 2021, January 2022, and December 2022. At this time, India “shifted its strategy, emphasising capacity-building and development of external partnerships over accommodating Chinese concerns in the hope of reciprocity.”⁹

The Indian perspective on the Indo-Pacific drew inspiration from former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe’s speech in the Indian Parliament, where he referred to the “confluence of the two seas” as indicative of the interconnectedness between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the geopolitical factors that were driving the recognition of the Indo-Pacific concept. The reason why Abe viewed the two oceans as an interconnected maritime space stemmed from two factors: India as a predominant power with blue-water naval capabilities and ability to project power in the IOR; and India’s own rising economic growth and potential made it an attractive partner for Japan.¹⁰

India’s foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is centred on inclusiveness, cooperation, and sustainable development. In 2022, Dr S. Jaishankar noted:

we envisage a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, one which is built on a rules-based international order, sustainable and transparent infrastructure

⁸ Starting on 5 May 2020, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in aggressive melees, face-offs, and skirmishes along the Sino-Indian border, including near the disputed Pangong Lake in Ladakh and near the border between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region. For more, see <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-china-border-dispute-explained-revisiting-the-2020-galwan-clash-amid-latest-patrolling-agreement/articleshow/114424670.cms?from=mdr>.

⁹ Walter Ladwig, “The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy”, Royal United Services Institute, 30 April 2024, at <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/policy-briefs/indo-pacific-indian-foreign-policy>. (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

¹⁰ Sundararaman, “Understanding the Indo-Pacific: Historical Context and Evolving Dynamics”, p. 13 I Barbara Kratuik, Jeroen J.J. Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskolska and Yoichiro Sato (ed.) *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*. 2023, Routledge, New York.

investment, freedom of navigation and over-flight, unimpeded lawful commerce, mutual respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, as well as equality of all nations.¹¹

This approach is guided by several frameworks/initiatives, such as the Act East policy, SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and the IPEF, among others. Through these initiatives, India seeks to promote a rules-based international order and enhance regional stability and capability to address common maritime challenges. Indeed, a “free, open, stable, peaceful, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific is a necessary pre-condition for peace, security, and prosperity of the world.”¹²

KEY FRAMEWORKS AND INITIATIVES

“Look East” to “Act East”

India’s Look East policy of the 1990s evolved into Act East policy in 2014. The policy represented a shift from a focus on economic cooperation to embracing a more action-oriented strategy, which included strategic partnerships, security, and infrastructure development with Southeast Asian nations. Through the Act East policy, India recognised the centrality of ASEAN as the institutional foundation of regional architecture. Additionally, “the rise of a belligerent China in the Indo-Pacific” region led to the Act East policy becoming “a cornerstone of India’s strategy to counterbalance China’s growing influence and assert its own presence in the region.”¹³

¹¹ “Speech by External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar on ‘India’s Vision of the Indo-Pacific Vision’”.

¹² “Remarks by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Nikkei Asia 2024 Future of Asia Forum”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 May 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/37824/Remarks_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_Nikkei_Asia_2024_Future_of_Asia_Forum. (Accessed on 8 December 2025).

¹³ Hsiao-Chen Lin, “Allies in the Making: India’s Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific Strategy”, *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2024, at <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/10.1142/S2717541324400114?srsltid=AfmBOorZPQxJWJYeTI0mXwgFqgxXodwGLBUQ6fTp5pJrY63zDosOuHG0>. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

Today, India's engagement with Southeast Asia reveals a recalibration of its regional strategy in which maritime-oriented partnerships are clearly prioritised. This is "evident in the establishment of new maritime dialogues with the Philippines and the expansion of naval exercises with Singapore and Indonesia."¹⁴ India is also institutionalising relationships through new diplomatic and military mechanisms, like CINBAX exercise with Cambodia and security dialogue with Malaysia. Under PM Modi's third term, India's engagement with Southeast Asia is marked by greater strategic coherence and institutional depth, representing a clear evolution from the earlier Act East framework.

SAGAR and MAHASAGAR

In 2015, PM Modi articulated India's vision of SAGAR during a visit to Mauritius.¹⁵ The policy primarily focused on improving India's relations with its immediate neighbours, like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles. It attempted to advance cooperation by utilising Indian expertise and capability to address common maritime challenges. In 2025, the Indian Navy advanced this vision to MAHASAGAR, reflecting a strategic recalibration intended to position India as a consequential maritime power in the Indian Ocean and extend its ambitions beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

The initiative represented a strategic expansion of the SAGAR vision to encompass East African littorals and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

¹⁴ Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East': Mapping India's Southeast Asian Engagement", ORF Issue Brief No. 800, Observer Research Foundation, May 2025, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-look-east-to-act-east-mapping-india-s-southeast-asian-engagement>. (Accessed on 6 November 2025).

¹⁵ "Prime Minister's Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius (March 12, 2015)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 March 2015, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/Prime_Ministers_Remarks_at_the_Commissioning_of_Offshore_Patrol_Vessel_OPV_Barracuda_in_Mauritius_March_12_2015. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

This progression was not a mere rhetorical evolution. As India sought to deepen its naval diplomacy, Africa emerged as the new strategic frontier and gateway for its “broader ambitions as a credible and preferred security partner.”¹⁶ India’s vision of MAHASAGAR signified the country’s recognition of Africa as central to its strategic maritime calculus.

Under India’s MAHASAGAR framework, two new landmark initiatives were launched. First was the Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) initiative, a planned biennial naval war game to increase interoperability with African navies and maritime law enforcement agencies. The inaugural war game took place off Dar es Salaam, in April 2025, and was co-hosted by the Indian Navy and the Tanzanian Peoples’ Defence Force (TPDF).¹⁷ Exercise participants included all the African WIO littorals. This was the first such multinational maritime exercise involving India and African nations, designed to synergise combined operations to develop collaborative solutions to address regional maritime insecurities, including piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking of narcotics and small arms.

The second initiative involved the Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) SAGAR. Under this, an Indian patrol vessel, *INS Sunayna*, successfully completed a month-long deployment in the Southwest Indian Ocean, with 44 international crew members from nine African countries jointly manning the ship alongside Indian Navy personnel.¹⁸ Indeed, training assistance

¹⁶ Ashish Singh, “India’s Maritime Pivot: From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR with Africa on sight”, *The Sunday Guardian*, 13 April 2025, at <https://latest.sundayguardianlive.com/investigation/indias-maritime-pivot-from-sagar-to-mahasagar-with-africa-on-sight>. (Accessed on 8 November 2025).

¹⁷ “Africa India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) 2025 Inauguration”, *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 13 April 2025, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2121521>. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

¹⁸ “INS Sunayna (IOS SAGAR) Returns to Kochi on Successful Completion of Month Long Deployment”, *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 8 May 2025 at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2127730®=3&lang=2>. (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

and capacity-building initiatives have been a hallmark of India's maritime engagement with Africa for a long time. However, initiatives like IOS Sagar provide an opportunity to exchange best practices, undertake coordinated patrols, and enhance interoperability and mutual understanding.

The MAHASAGAR will promote India's maritime leadership in the IOR as net security provider and first responder. It will help augment operational effectiveness in safeguarding the IOR maritime domain through joint training exercises, use of advanced technologies, and sharing of best practices. The MAHASAGAR vision, essentially, expands the reach and range of India's engagements to cover the entire Global South and burnish its credentials as a global player.

The IPOI

Launched by PM Modi on 4 November 2019, at the 14th East Asian Summit held in Bangkok, the main objective of the IPOI is safety, security, and stability of the maritime domain. In order to achieve these objectives, seven pillars have been laid out.¹⁹ The IPOI "is a global initiative that draws on existing regional cooperation architecture and mechanisms."²⁰ The idea is that one or two countries take the lead for a pillar, while other interested countries join voluntarily, thereby making the IPOI a cooperative venture. So far, 15 countries are a part of the IPOI and are co-leading one of its seven pillars. India has taken the lead for the pillars of maritime security (along with the UK) and disaster

¹⁹ The seven pillars of the IPOI are: maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; and trade, connectivity, and maritime transport. For more, see https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf.

²⁰ Premesha Saha and Abhishek Mishra, "The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative: Towards a Coherent Indo-Pacific Policy for India", ORF Occasional Paper No. 292, Observer Research Foundation, December 2020, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-indo-pacific-oceans-initiative-towards-a-coherent-indo-pacific-policy-for-india>. (Accessed on 5 March 2025).

risk reduction. Australia leads maritime ecology; France and Indonesia co-lead maritime resources; Italy and Singapore co-lead science and technology; Germany leads capacity building and resource sharing; and the US and Japan are co-leads on trade, connectivity, and maritime transport.

As mentioned earlier, India has increased the geographical area covered by its Indo-Pacific policy to include East Africa and WIO littorals. The WIO and the Arabian Sea are seen as included in India's construction of the expanded Indo-Pacific. This basically entails finding common thematic synergies between platforms in the entire Indo-Pacific region, whether it is the ASEAN mechanism in the East or the IORA in the West Indian Ocean. As pointed out by Jaishankar:

From our perspective, India will look to transfer lessons from the progress we hope to make in our partnerships in ASEAN-led mechanisms to the western Indian Ocean region, especially IORA. The goal should eventually be for all of us to have the capacity to seamlessly switch between platforms across the region, so as to deliver meaningful outcomes. In doing so, we can make better efforts to maximize the impact of our capabilities and resources, as well as the quality of outcomes.²¹

The IPOI not only focuses on securing maritime boundaries but also stresses on seeking partnerships. International cooperation is a prerequisite in shared spaces like the ocean. Therefore, from an Indian perspective, building partnerships with countries will be crucial in assisting governments to ensure aligned and mutually supportive actions along all the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and unlock the productive potential of marine resources. Developing purposive partnerships is at the core of the IPOI and it echoes India's plurilateral approach of engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

²¹ "Valedictory Address by External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S. Jaishankar at 11th Delhi Dialogue, 14 December 2019".

INDO-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP FOR MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS (IPMDA)

During the May 2022 QUAD Summit in Tokyo, the IPMDA programme was launched, which offers partner nations “advanced, real-time radio frequency data to advance maritime monitoring, address illegal fishing, manage climate and disaster response, and enforce maritime laws more effectively.”²² Developing MDA requires cultivating not only information and knowledge, but also “understanding” the maritime domain. Under the aegis of Australia, the IPMDA has been integrated with regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs), such as the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency, to enhance regional MDA in the Pacific. Such an approach could be emulated in the western part of the Indian Ocean between the QUAD and the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) in an effort to combat IUU fishing in the Indian Ocean.²³

At the present juncture, the IPMDA initiative is primarily concentrated upon satellite-based data of vessel movements. It correlates data from automatic identification system (AIS) transmitters with that obtained from satellite-based surveillance of vessel transmissions.²⁴ For conducting this task, the role of Information Fusion Centres (IFCs) across the Indo-Pacific, like India’s Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), Singapore’s IFC, and the IOC’s Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar, becomes crucial.

²² Mihir Shekhar Bhonsale and Dhruv Bansal, “India’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Strengthening Partnerships and Navigating Challenges”, Briefing Paper No. 5, CUTS International, October 2024, at <https://cuts-global.org/pdf/briefing-paper-5-Indias-indo-pacific-strategy-strengthening-partnerships-and-navigating-challenges.pdf>. (Accessed on 8 March 2025).

²³ Anuttama Banerji, “Approaches for the ‘Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness’ (IPMDA) to Actually Deliver on its Promise”, National Maritime Foundation, 6 August 2025, at https://maritimeindia.org/approaches-for-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness-ipmda-to-actually-deliver-on-its-promise/#_ftn21. (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

²⁴ Ibid.

Having a comprehensive maritime situational awareness across the Indo-Pacific is an imperative for India and its QUAD partners. Therefore, extending the IPMDA initiative to the WIO region will help to cover a greater geographical swathe and include African littorals within the IPMDA initiative.²⁵ In this regard, India's IFC-IOR, whose work covers this critical sub-regional space, will need to co-op the US and other regional partners and spearhead the initiative to extend the IPMDA to the WIO region.

Colombo Security Conclave (CSC)

The CSC is a regional maritime grouping established in 2011, comprising India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and Seychelles, aimed at addressing transnational security threats in the Indian Ocean. The CSC was originally established as a trilateral group (India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) and has since expanded to include Mauritius (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Seychelles (2025). The CSC operates through regular meetings of the national security advisors (NSAs) and deputy NSAs, with a permanent secretariat based in Colombo. The seventh edition of the CSC NSA-level meeting was held in New Delhi on 20 November 2025, with Malaysia participating as a guest state.²⁶

The CSC acts as a platform for collaborative, capacity-building initiatives and joint training for security officials. Most of the activities undertaken in the CSC revolve around five pillars: maritime safety and security; countering terrorism and radicalisation; combatting trafficking and transnational organised crime; cybersecurity and protection of critical

²⁵ “Quad Foreign Ministers Announce Plan to Expand IPMDA to the Indian Ocean Region”, *The Economic Times*, 29 July 2024, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/quad-foreign-ministers-announce-plan-to-expand-ipmda-to-indian-ocean-region/articleshow/112105577.cms?from=mdr>. (Accessed on 12 December 2025).

²⁶ “7th NSA-Level Meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave (November 20, 2025)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 20 November 2025, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40314/7th_NSA_Level_Meeting_of_the_Colombo_Security_Conclave_November_20_2025. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

infrastructure and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

Role of the Indian Navy in the IOR

India's strategic stakes in the Indian Ocean have grown substantially, necessitating a robust and forward-looking maritime force capable of solving various maritime insecurities. The Indian Navy, complemented by the Indian Coast Guard, plays an important role in securing India's maritime borders, contributing to regional stability, and safeguarding vital sea lanes. Apart from traditional threats, the navy also deals with non-traditional threats, like piracy, terrorism, IUU fishing, and human, arms, and drugs trafficking. The major roles which the Indian Navy plays are summarised in Table II.1.

Table II.1
Role of the Indian Navy in IOR

Role	Objective	Strategy
Military	Deterring inimical actions against India and protecting its national interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Building credible capability ● Enhancing MDA. ● Maritime air surveillance plan. ● Deployment of mission-based ship and surveillance aircraft.
Constabulary	Enforcing international maritime laws and security regimes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deployment of capital ships with significant combat capability across dimensions, that is, air, surface, and sub-surface. ● Anti-piracy operations. ● Anti-narcotics operations. ● HADR missions.
Benign	Shaping international maritime environment favourable to India's interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conducting HADR, search and rescue, and medical evacuation measures.

Role	Objective	Strategy
Diplomatic	Advancing India's interests through diplomatic engagement with maritime countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bilateral and multilateral maritime exercise. ● IFC-IOR at Gurugram fosters information exchange among the IOR littoral states and international treaty-bound organisations, like the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Interpol, and piracy reporting and monitoring centres with a regional or global outlook. ● NISHAR (Network for Information Sharing) application facilitates the exchange of information with friendly foreign countries. ● White shipping and information exchange agreement.

Source: Committee on External Affairs (2025).²⁷

Till date, the two main documents that define the Indian Navy's doctrine and strategy in the IOR are: *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security*

²⁷ Committee on External Affairs, "Evaluation India's Indian Ocean Strategy", Eighth Report, Ministry of External Affairs, 18th Lok Sabha, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, August 2025, at https://eparlib.sansad.in/bitstream/123456789/2992123/1/18_External_Affairs_8.pdf. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

Strategy (2015);²⁸ and the *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025*, released in December 2025, through which India now formally recognises the “no-war, no-peace” (grey zone) as a critical operational space.²⁹ The updated maritime doctrine, emphasising joint operations (theaterisation) and integrating emerging technology (artificial intelligence, cyber), seeks to align with the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision of harnessing oceans for national growth.

The Indian Navy has also been conducting maritime patrols/anti-piracy operations/escorts across the IOR. It has been maintaining around-the-year presence in various maritime areas: for instance, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and the east coast of Africa since 2008. In fact, a total of 128 ships have been deployed in the Gulf of Aden towards anti-piracy patrols since October 2008.³⁰ Another example is Operation Sankalp, launched by the Indian Navy in June 2019 in the Persian Gulf/Gulf of Oman region, to ensure the safety and security of ships traversing the Strait of Hormuz, which also helped to monitor the Pakistan Navy’s activities in the North Arabian Sea. Furthermore, the navy has maintained continued presence in the Malacca Strait (MALDEP) and Central and South Indian Ocean (CENTDEP and SOUTHDEP) to monitor extra-regional forces transiting in and out of the IOR. The Indian Navy’s long-range maritime surveillance aircraft, P-81, and high-altitude long-endurance remotely piloted aircraft (HALE RPA), Sea Guardian, have been extensively deployed for surveillance in the IOR

²⁸ Indian Navy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP) 1.2, October 2015, at https://bharatshakti.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf. (Accessed on 5 March 2025).

²⁹ Indian Navy, *Indian Maritime Doctrine 2025*, NSP 1.1, 4 December 2025, at <https://indiannavy.gov.in/content/indian-navy-releases-updated-edition-indian-maritime-doctrine-2025>. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

and within India's maritime zones to augment "domain awareness and understanding."³¹

Additionally, the Indian Navy has been providing assistance in conducting EEZ surveillance patrols, hydrographic surveys, diving assistance, search and rescue, and overseeing ship construction of friendly IOR littorals. Joint EEZ surveillance of the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Mozambique, and Madagascar has been undertaken regularly, based on the host country's request. The navy has also been conducting coordinated patrols (CORPATs) with Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Bangladesh on annual/biannual basis.

Despite facing numerous operational challenges, since October 2008, "133 Indian Navy ships have been deployed for anti-piracy patrol and 3765 merchant ships have been safely escorted."³² Since October 2023, due to escalating attacks by the Houthi rebels, the Indian Navy has "deployed more than 30 warships with integral helicopters, Marine Commandos, and Specialist Explosive Ordnance Disposal Teams in the affected areas, and has successfully thwarted 13 piracy incidents between October 2023 to June 2024, including apprehension of 62 pirates."³³ Presently, the Indian Navy has 137 ships, submarines, and 264 aircraft and its current modernisation plans are in accordance with the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (2012–27) and Maritime Capability Perspective Plan (2022–37).³⁴ The recent induction of the indigenous aircraft carrier, *INS Vikrant*, submarines (SSBNs), and Vishakhapatnam-class destroyers are examples of India's focused

³¹ "Evaluation India's Indian Ocean Strategy", Eighth Report, Committee on External Affairs (2024-2025), Ministry of External Affairs, pp. 40-41, 11 August 2025, at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://sansad.in/getFile/lssccommittee/External%20Affairs/18_External_Affairs_8.pdf?source=loksabhadocs. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

approach towards a threat and capability-based modernisation plan with an emphasis on developing indigenous equipment.

Going forward, India's naval and maritime policies will be guided by the Indian Navy's Vision 2047 through which the country seeks to reinforce the overarching vision of MAHASAGAR, which signifies India's vision to expand its influence and impact globally, using the seas as a conduit. In this pursuit, reinforcing the Indian Navy's identity as a "preferred security partner" of the Indian Ocean littorals and a "first responder" to humanitarian disasters across the Indian Ocean will remain a key objective.

CONCLUSION

India's approach towards the Indo-Pacific is not merely a reaction to China's growing assertiveness, belligerence, and unilateralism in the region. Rather, it represents "a broader effort to co-author a new regional order rooted in transparency, inclusivity, and cooperative security."³⁵ With the evolution of regional alignments, India's role in the Indo-Pacific has become central in ensuring peace, prosperity, and inclusivity. India's nuanced diplomacy has allowed it to maintain strong relations with the US, Russia, and China simultaneously, while cultivating and fostering maritime-oriented partnerships with African WIO littorals and Southeast Asian states. India seeks to advance "a model of networked, non-hierarchical multilateralism which challenges dominant strategic binaries—alliance vs. non-alignment, containment vs. bandwagoning."³⁶ Instead, India seeks to promote a multipolar, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

While India, its QUAD partners, the EU, and even the ASEAN, have all articulated their own versions of strategies towards the Indo-Pacific, conspicuous by its absence is African nations. Despite 38 out of 54

³⁵ Gagan C. and Kumar, "From Non-alignment to Multi-alignment: India's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Shifting Geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific".

³⁶ Ibid.

countries boasting coastlines, African countries have thus far failed to come up with their own outlook on the Indo-Pacific. However, this does not mean that there is any dearth of continental frameworks or strategies at the African RECs level that are guiding African maritime strategies. At the continental level, the AU has the AIMS 2050 and the 2016 Lomé Charter. There are also the DCoC and the YCoC, focusing on the WIO and the Atlantic Ocean respectively, and the Revised African Maritime Transport Charter which came into effect in 2025, among others. African nations are naturally concerned with the “Indo” aspect of the Indo-Pacific strategy due to concerns on their eastern seaboard, yet a coherent and unified African outlook towards the Indo-Pacific continues to remain elusive.

AFRICAN MARITIME SECURITY AND MULTILATERAL CAPACITY BUILDING

In an African context, maritime security has been a relatively minor concern within the African security discourse. Despite 38 out of 54 African countries boasting coastlines, most of the countries have had an inward, continental outlook. They have prioritised tackling immediate concerns, such as civil wars, inter-state rivalries, and border disputes, and have also been focused on policies to promote economic development. Security and economic development concerns have traditionally derived from the land. Public awareness of maritime issues has been limited, particularly outside specific locations, such as port cities or coastal fishing communities. However, with the rise of new security challenges at sea and the growing importance attached to blue-economy agenda, especially by the Global South, this tendency of African countries—suffering from a culture of “seablindness”—is changing at a rapid pace. Maritime security and the importance of securing maritime domain are increasingly assuming prominence within the broader African security agenda.¹

Since African countries, particularly the WIO littorals, are primarily concerned with developments associated with the “Indo” portion of the Indo-Pacific discourse, this chapter focuses on how maritime security in an African context has evolved, particularly in the WIO region. As

¹ Abhishek Mishra, “Evolution of African Maritime Security: Imperatives, Governance and Challenges”, MP-IDSA Occasional Paper No. 64, New Delhi, October 2024, at <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/op-64-amishra-281024-1.pdf>. (Accessed on 7 May 2025).

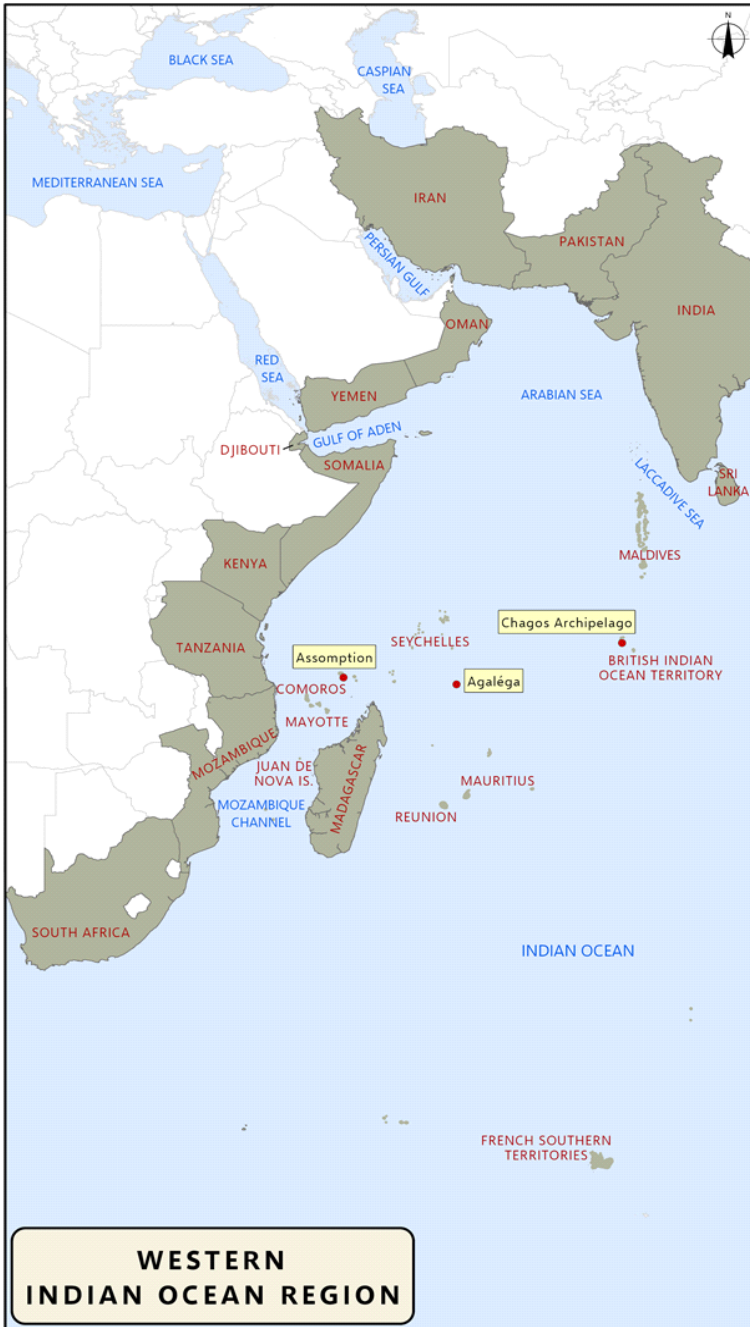
highlighted in earlier chapters, most nations, including India, the US, Japan, France, and Australia, now consider the Indo-Pacific region to stretch from the eastern shores of Africa to the Western Pacific. Therefore, the task of analysing the role of the WIO as a critical sub-region within the Indo-Pacific construct becomes paramount.

The WIO region is an artery of maritime trade between Europe and South and East Asia and has “functioned as a crucible of experimentation for maritime capacity building efforts.”² Although capacity building as a concept is not new, emphasis on this in the international security discourse is more novel. When viewed through the lens of maritime security, the WIO has become an “international laboratory for capacity building projects that emerged as a response to the unprecedented upsurge of Somali-based piracy.”³

² Christian Bueger and Simone Tholens, “Theorizing Capacity Building”, in Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Robert McCabe (eds), *Capacity Building for Maritime Security: The Western Indian Ocean Experience*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 21–45.

³ Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Robert McCabe, *Capacity Building for Maritime Security: The Western Indian Ocean Experience*, p. 4, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021.

Figure III.1 Western Indian Ocean Region



Prior to the escalation of piracy, foreign assistance and intervention in the WIO region tended to focus almost entirely on the security and humanitarian situation ashore in Somalia. There was an inherent lack of a dedicated and targeted regional approach to tackle the growing instances of insecurities in the maritime domain. This was due, in part, to the insular political dynamics of the region and a lack of a shared security strategy or framework for regional dialogue. Each country in the WIO region has had historically divergent strategies, politics, and relations with donor states and organisations. In the post-piracy phase from 2012 onwards, multilateral projects in the WIO region have endeavoured “to build capacities to tackle maritime insecurity at a regional level and contribute to the sustainable economic development of regional states.”⁴ To what extent these externally funded initiatives have succeeded in improving the local capacities of African nations to deal with maritime challenges and insecurities requires examination.

African littorals in the WIO lack sufficient capacity to effectively deal with traditional and non-conventional maritime challenges and protect their maritime resources.⁵ The growing militarisation and scramble for influence in African maritime waters, in the form of geopolitical competition between external countries, have made African countries susceptible to the risks of undermining their own national and regional maritime security initiatives.⁶ International partners, like the EU, the US, and India, have employed a host of training and capacity-building

⁴ Robert McCabe, “Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives”, in Bueger, Edmunds, and McCabe (eds), *Capacity Building for Maritime Security: The Western Indian Ocean Experience*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021, p. 132.

⁵ Abhishek Mishra, “India–Africa Maritime Cooperation: The Case of Western Indian Ocean”, ORF Occasional Paper No. 221, Observer Research Foundation, November 2019, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-africa-maritime-cooperation-the-case-of-western-indian-ocean>. (Accessed on 21 May 2025).

⁶ Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger, “Maritime Security and the Western Indian Ocean’s Militarisation Dilemma”, *African Security Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2022, pp. 195–210.

initiatives in the region to improve African maritime capacities. However, to what extent have these approaches towards capacity building and training by international organisations been successful? Towards this objective, this chapter broadly analyses three experimental, multilateral maritime capacity-building projects conceived and supported by international organisations. First is the DCoC process led by the International Maritime Organization (IMO)⁷; second, the regional work of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), that is, Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP); and third, the capacity-building projects of the EU, namely, the EU-funded programme to promote regional maritime security (MASE) and the related capacity-building missions, EUCAP Nestor/Somalia and EU CRIMARIO.

CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE MARITIME SECTOR

Capacity building is a foundational practice in international relations. As a concept, it is not a new practice and has its roots in the post-World War II period when technical assistance was provided by developed countries to newly independent post-colonial states. Such technical assistance mostly comprised skills sharing and grants and financial aid, which were meant to ease the process of decolonisation and help augment the capacities of countries to tackle problems and achieve sustainable development. This practice became a regular feature of international security in the 1990s with the rise of the failed state discourse. In current times, capacity building is conceived as an alternative to—while simultaneously building on—more traditional approaches, such as development assistance, state building, or security sector reform. This concept entails employing fluid and flexible approaches to solving societal and developmental issues. Rather than top-down approaches or one-size-fits-all policies, the concept and practice of capacity building relies more on technology, knowledge, and expertise.

⁷ The IMO is a specialised organisation of the United Nations (UN) which covers all aspects of international shipping, including ship design, construction, manning, operation, and disposal. For more, see <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Pages/Default.aspx>.

As a field of international activity, maritime security is both novel and developing. It is “only to a limited degree constituted by settled definitions, norms, and established knowledge.”⁸ The concept of maritime security is ever-evolving and is comprised of various potentially contradicting norms, like the norm of freedom of navigation, territorial sovereignty, the global commons, and the concept of “good order at sea”, which is essentially the maritime equivalence to good governance on land. Today, there are a range of settled global rules and norms relating to maritime security which are agreed on and codified by international conventions. Some of the most important ones are the UNCLOS, the SOLAS Convention, the ISPS Code, and the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), which was facilitated by the IMO. As guardians of these conventions, it is the task of maritime international organisations, like the IMO and the UNODC, to work towards compliance with these norms.

In terms of capacity building for maritime security in an African context, the experience has been a mix of assistance from both international donors and international organisations, and few initiatives led by African countries and institutions.

Standards for the organization of maritime security are also increasingly introduced and codified by regional agreements, including the inter-governmental Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) or the African Union’s 2016 Lomé Charter. The standards and instruments proposed in these informal processes, however, remain often vague and underspecified or are essentially contested.⁹

Various multilateral capacity-building initiatives have been directed towards the WIO littorals and have ranged from developing regional maritime patrols and surveillance systems, enhancing regional law

⁸ Bueger and Tholens, “Theorizing Capacity Building”, p. 37.

⁹ Bueger and Tholens, “Theorizing Capacity Building”, p. 38.

enforcement capacities, to improving inter-agency and cross-national information-sharing tools and systems. These activities also include support for the development of blue economy by tackling IUU fishing and strengthening security ashore and in coastal waters.

The foremost factor that led to a host of maritime capacity-building initiatives being undertaken was the threat to ships and seafarers from the escalation of piracy off the coast of Somalia. Piracy was at its zenith in the WIO region between 2005–12. Since the region's littorals lacked the necessary maritime capacity to respond to piracy on their own, external assistance from partners and organisations was required. Most of the initiatives that were adopted in this period focused solely on tackling the challenge of piracy and lacked any regional approach. Any foreign assistance or intervention tended to focus entirely on the humanitarian situation ashore in Somalia. However, this changed following a decline in piracy attacks after 2012 as the ambit and the objectives of multilateral maritime capacity-building projects in the WIO region began to diversify in scope and intended outcomes. In the post-piracy phase, these initiatives "...endeavoured to tackle maritime insecurities at a regional level and contribute to the sustainable economic development of regional states."¹⁰

However, the international focus on a regional approach to maritime capacity building in the WIO region also turned out to be problematic. It is important to understand that the maritime capacity-building initiatives being undertaken in the WIO region were taking place in a maritime environment that was interconnected and multijurisdictional. There were too many institutions and programmes at play with overlapping jurisdictions. This complicated the task of coordinating practices and enforcing capacities. Even though the intentions of these capacity-building initiatives were noble, they sometimes fell short of expectations due to many reasons. Some programmes had overly ambitious regional mandates, while others had a rigid adherence to

¹⁰ McCabe, "Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives", p. 133.

counter-piracy. Some of the regional maritime coordination centres that were developed at the time also lacked the necessary infrastructure and funding. Additionally, maintaining working relationships with local trainers and building locally informed and functional MDA architectures was challenging. Subsequently, it was often bilateral agreements and partners who were more effective in building sustainable capacities and institutional structures.

Furthermore, the political dynamics of the WIO region was more inward looking. The region's littorals lacked a shared security strategy or regional framework. Each of the countries in the WIO region had a distinct history and nature of engagement with international donors and partners. Their domestic political considerations and colonial legacies consequently impacted the way in which programmes and initiatives were implemented and executed in the WIO region. Nonetheless, the region was gaining in prominence. The discovery of oil and gas reserves in the WIO region led many external powers to look at it with keen interest. Thus, it was not only the escalation of piracy and security threats that mandated the involvement of external actors, but also the abundant amount of natural resources that the region boasted of.

MULTILATERAL CAPACITY-BUILDING INITIATIVES IN THE WIO REGION

The outbreak and escalation of piracy and armed robberies in the WIO region became a cause of concern for countries and seafarers from the beginning of the 2000s. The number of pirate attacks increased rapidly in the subsequent years due to which countries had to incur substantial amount of economic and commercial losses. Since this alarming trend became one of the foremost challenges confronting the global community, addressing it became a foremost priority for various countries. Many external players, like the EU, India, China, the US, and other international organisations, undertook several multilateral and bilateral initiatives to contain this challenge. Subsequently, the WIO region became synonymous to an experimental playground in which countries tested and enforced their programmes and initiatives. Although much of the capacity-building assistance was steered by external countries, regional African countries were also prompt to acknowledge the gravity of the issue and worked to develop regional solutions.

However, due to an inherent lack of capacity—both financial and operational—of the African countries, they had to depend on external assistance and support to tackle the transnational challenges arising in their maritime domain.

The following sections explore some multilateral capacity-building initiatives by international actors and organisations, such as the IMO, the UNODC, and the EU, aimed at developing regional maritime capabilities in order to tackle transnational maritime challenges and develop a robust maritime security and maritime governance architecture in the region.

The IMO and the DCoC

One of the major regional frameworks for capacity building in the WIO region is the DCoC,¹¹ which was signed on 29 January 2009. The DCoC, initiated, negotiated, and facilitated by the IMO, was adopted as a regional response to the prevailing threat of Somalia-based piracy. It has been adopted by 20 countries in the WIO and is loosely modelled on the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).¹² All the WIO African littorals have ratified the agreement, in addition to Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti.

The DCoC is considered to be the foundation of regional capacity-building work of the IMO. One of the foremost tasks of the IMO is to provide technical assistance and capacity-building programmes. The

¹¹ The full title of the DCoC is “The Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden”.

¹² The ReCAAP is the first regional government-to-government agreement to promote and enhance cooperation against piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia. The agreement was signed in 2004 and entered into force in 2006 with 14 Asian contracting parties; and the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP ISC) was established the same year, with its headquarters in Singapore. For more, see <https://www.recaap.org/>.

IMO Resolution A.901(21) outlines the framework for the organisation's global capacity-building priority areas: institutional capacity building; advocacy of global maritime rules and standards; and human resource development.¹³

The capacity-building work of the DCoC has been a welcome development. However, though the network of DCoC national focal points has been effective in disseminating information of incidents relating to piracy, the network alone has not been enough to coordinate information about maritime threats due to the varying responsibilities of each ministry. Further, since the DCoC has been signed as a non-binding instrument, it has failed to develop an effective and strong governing structure, which has made the code difficult to implement for the IMO. What it has taught is that no single agency has monopoly over the maritime domain. States need to cooperate effectively through better and seamless inter-agency coordination. At the same time, the buy-in and leadership at the highest political office is also essential as it helps to facilitate better inter-ministerial coordination. Without a strong foundation at the national level, effective regional cooperation is not possible to achieve.¹⁴

Some of the key components of the DCoC are as follows:

1. **Djibouti Regional Training Centre (DRTC):** The practical and on-ground delivery of capacity-building training that is imparted to maritime administrators and coastal law enforcement officials is coordinated via the DRTC building in Doraleh, Djibouti, which

¹³ IMO, "Resolution A.901(21)", A21/Res.901, 4 February 2000, at [https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/KnowledgeCentre/IndexofIMOResolutions/AssemblyDocuments/A.901\(21\).pdf](https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/KnowledgeCentre/IndexofIMOResolutions/AssemblyDocuments/A.901(21).pdf). (Accessed on 18 August 2025).

¹⁴ These lessons that were learnt from the implementation and experience of the DCoC were highlight by Kiruja Micheni of the IMO at an online webinar, "Improving African Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean", organised by the ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, on 21 October 2020 at <https://issafrica.org/events/improving-african-maritime-security-in-the-western-indian-ocean>.

was formally opened on 15 November 2015. Japan funded this through the DCoC Trust Fund and was supported by Denmark and the Republic of Korea. The DRTC “hosts a regionally-informed and maritime-oriented ‘knowledge centre’ that functions as a learning repository both for trainers and trainees.”¹⁵ The training imparted at the centre deals with a range of issues, such as law enforcement at sea, maritime and port security, information sharing, and management of marine resources. The support staff at the centre is minimal as most of the training activities are outsourced to regional countries that are recognised as training providers, like Kenya, Seychelles, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa, among others.

2. **DCoC’s Information Sharing Centres (ISCs):** Apart from building capacity through training, the DCoC has also been able to successfully create three regional maritime ISCs. These centres function as focal points for reporting piracy-related incidents and other illicit maritime activities. They are strategically located and contribute to improving the regional MDA. Part of the Djibouti Information Sharing Network (ISN),¹⁶ the three ISCs are located in: Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which caters to reports from member states in the southern region; Mombasa, Kenya, which covers the central area; and Sana’a in Yemen, which covers the information in the northern region. However, owing to the ongoing conflict in Yemen, the centre in Sana’a has been non-operational since June 2019, but the Government of Yemen has indicated its willingness to re-establish the centre in the city of Aden.¹⁷

¹⁵ McCabe, “Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives”, p. 136.

¹⁶ An ISN, based on a secured Internet web-based network, facilitates the exchange of reports among the national focal points and the ISCs and other relevant authorities, such as international navies and other reporting centres, to solicit appropriate responses to incidents.

¹⁷ DCoC, “Information Sharing”, at <https://dcoc.org/information-sharing>.

- 3. Mombasa Protocol:** In the post-piracy phase, the WIO countries recognised that there were other maritime security challenges, in addition to piracy, that were being faced by the regional countries. Therefore, the Mombasa Protocol was signed in 2015, spearheaded by Kenya, Tanzania, Yemen, and Djibouti—four countries where the regional ISCs and the DRTC were located. The protocol aimed to establish “a sustainable structure for regional maritime cooperation, define the rules of governance, and reinforce regional cooperation for maritime situational awareness and training by maximising the opportunities afforded by the DCoC agreement.”¹⁸ In addition, these four countries also encouraged other WIO signatory states to renew their engagement with the DCoC under the principles of “integrated concerns and differentiated responsibilities”,¹⁹ and continue to implement the provisions of the DCoC in a consistent, efficient, effective, and sustained manner.
- 4. Jeddah Amendment to the DCoC:** If the Mombasa Protocol brought the attention of WIO countries to other transnational maritime security challenges apart from piracy, then the Jeddah Amendment, signed in 2017, formalised the scope of the DCoC to move beyond piracy. So far, the amendment has been signed by 16 countries: Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Seychelles, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Madagascar, Kenya, Mozambique, the Maldives, Somalia, Oman, Mauritius, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, and Tanzania. According to the IMO, “The Jeddah Amendment recognises the important role of the ‘blue economy’ including shipping, seafaring, fisheries and tourism in supporting sustainable economic growth, food security, employment, prosperity and stability.”²⁰

¹⁸ Mombasa Protocol, “Mombasa Protocol under the Djibouti Code of Conduct”, 2 July 2015, pp. 1–16, at <https://issuu.com/criticalmaritimeroles/docs/mombasa-protocol-en>. (Accessed on 10 June 2025).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ IMO, “Regional Maritime Piracy Agreement Broadened to Cover Other Illicit Maritime Activity”, 13 January 2017, at <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/PressBriefings/Pages/4-DCOC-widened.aspx>. (Accessed on 7 May 2025).

The UNODC's GMCP and Indian Ocean Forum on Maritime Crime (IOFMC)

Apart from the IMO, another crucial capacity-building organisation that has worked in the WIO is the UNODC. Earlier, in 1997, it was known as the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, with the mandate of supporting the work of the United Nations (UN) on “interrelated issues of drug control, crime prevention, and international terrorism in the context of sustainable development and human security.”²¹ The main work of the UNODC involved the reform of the criminal justice sector, in addition to prevention of drug abuse and tackling organised crime and terrorism. The UNODC’s focus on maritime criminality in the WIO started in 2008 when the problem of piracy was at its zenith. This was followed by a host of UN Security Council resolutions that called for international action to mitigate the effect of Somalia-based piracy. These provided the rationale for the UNODC to pursue maritime capacity-building work due to the need to procure effective justice for Somali piracy suspects and ensure that human rights standards were upheld. “This initially focussed on building criminal justice capacity in Kenya, Seychelles and Somalia through a Counter-Piracy Programme based in Nairobi, but gradually extended into a Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP) by 2014 that is active in over 20 countries worldwide.”²²

One of the major achievements of the UNODC in developing the criminal justice response was the creation of a regional “piracy prosecution model”.²³ When the international naval forces were

²¹ UN Secretariat, “Organization of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime”, ST/SGB/2004/6, 15 March 2004, at https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/files/ST_SGB-2004-6%20Organization%20of%20the%20UNODC.pdf. (Accessed on 7 May 2025).

²² McCabe, “Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives”, p. 140.

²³ The regional piracy prosecution model in the Indian Ocean is an innovative criminal justice response to piracy. Although piracy can be prosecuted by any state, the states of the IOR have taken the lead to tackle a regional security issue that affects them all directly. For more, see <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/piracy/indian-ocean-division.html>.

deployed in the Horn of Africa region to intervene and tackle the problem of piracy, they were successful at first. The military interventions proved to be an effective deterrent. However, these naval forces faced an immediate obstacle. When pirates were intercepted at sea, there was a glaring lack of any clear mechanism to hold these suspected pirates criminally accountable. Often, the naval forces were forced to release the suspected pirates without placing sanctions due to the lack of an appropriate criminal justice mechanism that would enable prosecution. Therefore, a regional piracy prosecution model was set up to help the counter-piracy operation. Under this model, states like Seychelles and Kenya, which had the necessary domestic regulation in place to prosecute piracy, were identified as prosecuting states. These states worked together and formalised transfer agreements with international naval forces operating counter-piracy patrols in the IOR. Upon being apprehended at sea, the naval forces would secure and record the evidence. Following this, a prosecuting state would evaluate the evidence on its own and proceed to investigate and prosecute the case domestically.

The UNODC, through the GMCP, established the IOFMC in 2014 as a trans-regional mechanism to coordinate actions relating to maritime crimes. Through this mechanism, capacity-building initiatives were imparted to countries in the IOR. The mechanism prioritised several categories of regional maritime criminal activities, ranging from narcotics trafficking, trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, wildlife products, illegal fishing, to the illicit Somalia charcoal trade, which was rampant in the Horn of Africa region.²⁴ The area in which the IOFMC contributed the most was in identifying gaps in the legal and practical capacity of the regional states to combat maritime crimes, such as drug trafficking, the illicit trade of wildlife and forest resources, and trafficking in persons.²⁵ Apart from identifying the gaps, the forum

²⁴ UNODC, *Annual Report 2015*, Vienna: UNODC, p. 132, at https://www.unodc.org/documents/AnnualReport2015/Annual_Report_2016_WEB.pdf. (Accessed on 10 June 2025).

²⁵ UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation with respect to Piracy and Armed robbery at Sea Off the Coast of Somalia", S/2016/843, 7 October 2016, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/844765?ln=en>. (Accessed on 10 June 2025).

also created a platform in which senior prosecutors from regional WIO states would discuss mechanisms for better cooperation and share and exchange information on maritime crime cases. The IOFMC was a successful capacity-building initiative. It provided an important platform for regional states to coordinate their responses to maritime crimes, in particular through its prosecutors' network, thus enabling the effective prosecution of transnational crime across the IOR.

If the IOFMC provided a common platform for regional prosecutors to coordinate their responses, then the GMCP, under its counter-piracy programme, provided a model which enabled the prosecution of pirates across the IOR. As mentioned earlier, certain countries, like Kenya and Seychelles, took the lead in prosecution, conviction, and imprisonment of pirates. However, in the case of small countries, like Seychelles, prison capacity was scarce, whereas the piracy sentences in the region were lengthy. Therefore, in 2010, the UNODC developed the Piracy Prisoner Transfer Programme (PPTF) in "response to calls from prosecuting states for a long-term imprisonment solution"²⁶ for those pirates convicted in their courts. Under the PPTF, two prisons were built—in Puntland and Somaliland—with a full assistance package from the UNODC. This package included assistance with construction, staff training, and associated law reform and prison operation. Other projects, based on specific national needs, were also implemented by the UNODC, such as building of new court buildings in Mauritius and Seychelles in 2015. All these activities help underscore the UNODC's efforts to tailor its criminal justice capacity-building initiatives according to the specific needs and context of the WIO states.

MASE, CRIMARIO, and the EU

The EU launched its first-ever naval operation in 2008, EUNAVFOR—Operation Atalanta, within the framework of the CSDP. This was

²⁶ United Nations Office on Crimes and Drugs, "Counter-Piracy Programme", Issue 7, September/October 2011 at [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.unodc.org/documents/Piracy/UNODC_Brochure_Issue_7_WV.pdf](https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.unodc.org/documents/Piracy/UNODC_Brochure_Issue_7_WV.pdf). (Accessed on 16 July 2025).

followed by a civilian-led regional maritime capacity-building mission, EUCAP Nestor, in 2012, which was later renamed as EUCAP Somalia. In addition, the EU supported the DCoC through capacity building project MARSIC²⁷ which was continued as the broader project CRIMARIO in 2015. In 2013, it also launched the regional Maritime Security Programme (MASE).

All these multisectoral initiatives came under the umbrella of the EU's "Strategic Framework for the Horn of Africa". The framework, finalised in 2013, outlined some of the inherent security and humanitarian issues that contributed to disorder in Somalia.²⁸ In terms of the EU's counter-piracy approach, it noted the importance of "tackling piracy on land and enhancing judicial capacities to arrest, transfer, detain and prosecute piracy suspects; enhancing the coastal security capabilities of the riparian countries; addressing the root causes of piracy on land and encouraging adherence to the Best Management Practices (BMP) for shipping and improved standards for the maritime security industry."²⁹ The EU's maritime security capacity-building approach was similar to that of the IMO and the UNODC, especially in terms of design and objectives, as all these three international organisations recognised that security is a precondition for development. Without one, the other cannot be achieved. Therefore, the goal has always been to empower people and the states to take ownership of their developmental process.

One of the EU's first attempts at a civilian-led maritime security capacity-building mission was EUCAP Nestor (2012) and EUCAP Somalia

²⁷ Enhancing Maritime Security and Safety through Information Sharing and Capacity Building project of the EU, commonly known as the MARSIC project, was launched in 2010 and continued till August 2015. The focus was to support the DCoC and ensure the implementation of its three ISCs.

²⁸ EU Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution on 15 January 2013 on EU Strategy for the Horn of Africa", P7_TA(2013)0006, 15 January 2013, at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TEXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52013IP0006>. (Accessed on 12 July 2025).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

(2016). The EUCAP Nestor had an ambitious regional mandate of building maritime governance and counter-piracy capacities in certain countries, like Djibouti, Seychelles, Kenya, Tanzania, and Somalia. However, as Christian Bueger notes, project members lacked sufficient prior knowledge of existing capacity-building initiatives, such as those of the IMO and the UNODC, and consequently, struggled to avoid repetition and overlap with these other programmes.³⁰ Another problem that this programme faced was the lack of prior knowledge of local context and varying country-specific capacity needs of the WIO states. For example, countries like Kenya and Tanzania desired physical assets, such as coast guard vessels, but the Nestor's mandate tended to focus on skills and expertise capacity, rather than the provision of equipment. Owing to the over-ambitious original mandate of EUCAP Nestor and other redundancies, in December 2016, the Council of the European Union decided to downsize the vast mandate of EUCAP Nestor and make it more targeted. Subsequently, the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia) was established, whose work exclusively focused on Somalia and Somaliland. This mission's mandate was to provide assistance to the maritime sector by supporting the development of the Somali Coast Guard functions and wider police development.

In addition to EUCAP Somalia, the EU also established Enhancing Maritime Safety and Security through Information Sharing and Capacity Building project, commonly known as MARSIC, in 2010. This programme was mainly designed to support the DCoC, in particular the implementation and sustainability of the four centres that were established following the signature of DCoC, that is, the three ISCs and the DRTC. The EU, through the MARSIC project, provided mentorship programmes and training to administrative staff, officials,

³⁰ Christian Bueger, "In Search for a Mission? The EU's Regional Training Mission EUCAP Nestor", Piracy-studies.org, 13 October 2013, at <http://piracy-studies.org/in-search-for-a-mission-the-eus-regional-training-mission-eucap-nestor/>. (Accessed on 12 July 2025).

and coast guards across the WIO region. The project ran until 2015, following which CRIMARIO was launched in order to improve maritime safety and security in East Africa. The main goal of this initiative was to work with littoral countries to develop their “maritime situational awareness” in the IOR through capacity-building initiatives.³¹ Its task was to improve the information-sharing architecture and mechanisms in the region through cooperation and better coordination, thereby promoting interoperability of different ISCs across the region. In 2016, the project announced plans for an Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform, which would act as a maritime communications and coordination tool for the WIO region. The platform was officially launched in September 2018 in Mahe, Seychelles. This programme complemented the work of CRIMARIO by establishing a regional AIS, and conducting training exercises and national and regional workshops.

CONCLUSION

The approaches employed by international organisations and partners for multilateral capacity building in the WIO have varied in terms of scope, geographical reach, and components. They have ranged from conducting short-term training courses, technical training workshops, to e-learning platforms and embedded mentorship programmes. The work of the IMO, as mentioned earlier, has prioritised institutional capacity building, advocacy of global maritime rules and standards, and human resource development. The UNODC’s work, with its focus on building criminal justice capacity, has strived to combine different capacity-building tools, including police mentors, training courses, and developing a platform for a network of legal prosecutors to discuss legal mechanisms and coordinate responses to maritime crimes. The EU also has adopted a comprehensive approach to building maritime

³¹ Maritime situational awareness involves the sharing and fusion of data from various national and international maritime agencies in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the maritime domain.

capacities by training regional maritime forces, improving information-sharing mechanisms, and conducting naval counter-piracy operations.

While all the initiatives mentioned in this chapter have experienced varying degrees of success, they have also suffered due to lack of information and awareness of the local contexts in which these capacity-building initiatives are being incorporated. It has often proved to be difficult to coordinate such vast regional capacity-building projects with local and international organisations. The failure to consult regional and local agencies, particularly while designing the nature of capacity-building initiatives, has limited the long-term impact of some of the multilateral initiatives. The lack of strategic coherence about what maritime capacity building is attempting to achieve, and the means to implement it on a sustainable basis, has made the task a complex process for international capacity-building providers in the WIO region. The problems have been compounded by a vast and complex array of overlapping, and often competing, regional institutions attempting to address maritime security in the region.

The experience of multilateral capacity-building initiatives in the WIO has, thus, been a mixed one. The fact that these initiatives have moved beyond their narrow focus of tackling piracy to attempting to address the systematic causes of maritime criminality has been a welcome development. However, as McCabe notes: “The majority of capacity building activities have enjoyed some short-term, technical successes, but have also struggled in transferring ownership to local partners and agencies for sustainable development of the maritime security sector.”³² Therefore, in order to be successful, any multilateral capacity-building initiative in the WIO will need to ensure effective coordination in the conception, planning, and implementation of individual initiatives, together with existing capacities of national agencies and other capacity-building organisations.

³² McCabe, “Western Indian Ocean: Multilateral Capacity Building Initiatives”, p. 156.

INTEGRATING AFRICA WITHIN THE INDO-PACIFIC CONSTRUCT

The preceding chapters highlight the evolution of the Indo-Pacific region as a vast maritime space, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single geographical construct. The region accounts for 60 per cent of the world's population, 63 per cent of global GDP, and 46 per cent of the world's merchandised trade which traverse across key maritime chokepoints, like the Strait of Malacca. This makes the Indo-Pacific region central to global trade and energy security. Within this region, the African continent sits at the western edge of the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, any developments across the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the Indian Ocean, can directly impact the continent's peace, security, and sustainable development. Although many countries have Indo-Pacific strategies that include Africa's eastern coastline, the continent itself has thus far not articulated its own comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy. This lack of articulation can be attributed to several factors.

Despite the recognition and acknowledgment of the importance of maritime security and Africa's ocean bodies for achieving developmental goals, many African countries, including African coastal nations, have continued to prioritise important domestic challenges, such as healthcare, education, poverty, and the impacts of climate change. There has been a continued lack of consensus from African countries regarding the continent's role and specific interests in the Indo-Pacific, which includes maritime security, marine resources, disaster management, and connectivity. The challenges have been compounded by the African Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean and East African littorals being initially excluded from the early deliberations that defined the Indo-Pacific as a strategic construct. Thus, no single or unified African voice has so far been able to list specific maritime priorities or interests. The differing and varying maritime and developmental priorities of the African nations further exacerbate the

situation. Even the pan-continental body, the AU, is yet to define the continent's role in the Indo-Pacific, despite drafting various regional strategies, maritime transport charters, integrated strategies, and code of conducts. Although the Indo-Pacific is still a relatively new term, it is clear that African nations are still underprepared to publicly articulate foreign policy strategies in response to the Indo-Pacific construct.¹ Most African nations are still in the process of grappling with the concept and attempting to understand how it applies to their own geopolitical landscape.

WHY HAS AFRICA NOT ESPOUSED AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY YET?

The WIO has, once again, emerged as a focal point of international security concerns with growing number of attacks on commercial shipping by the Houthi forces and a slight resurgence of piracy off the coast of Somalia from November 2023.² Consequently, maritime security in the WIO has been thrust back into the global spotlight. However, these incidents constitute only a part of a complex web of liminal and interconnected security challenges facing this strategically important waterway. Problems are also compounded by the fact that “the WIO, as an established and clearly defined region, is contested till date.”³ Regional organisations, such as the RMIFC, consider their area of interest to span across the entire Indian Ocean, stretching from India's western coast to Africa's eastern coast. The DCoC includes the

¹ Denys Reva, “Africa Must Stake its Claim in the Indo-Pacific”, ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 19 May 2021, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-must-stake-its-claim-in-the-indo-pacific>.

² Christian Bueger, “Somali Pirates are Back in Action. A Strong Global Response is Needed,” *Safe Seas*, 19 January 2024, at <https://www.safeseas.net/piracy-2024/>.

³ Daniela Marggraff, “Maritime Security in Africa's Western Indian Ocean”, ISS Southern Africa Report No. 63, November 2025, at <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1763963407495-sar-63.pdf>.

Red Sea and its adjoining states in its conceptualisation, but leaves out states like Iran and Pakistan. Other bodies, like the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), consider the WIO to stretch from Somalia in the north to South Africa in the south, including Africa's Indian Ocean island nations.

As Daniela Marggraff notes: "These conceptualisation differences of the WIO do not reflect operational, but rather political, preferences."⁴ For instance, India prefers to work through broader structures, like the IORA, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and its own IFC-IOR located in Gurugram. Some other countries, like South Africa and Australia, prefer to address maritime security through the IORA and the IOC, which comprises Africa's five Indian Ocean island nations, focuses on the Southwest Indian Ocean, and refers to it as Indianoceania.⁵ The US' engagement with African countries on maritime security issues remains divided between three structures, namely, US AFRICOM, CENTCOM, and INDOPACOM, resulting in a fragmented approach towards maritime security in the broader Indian Ocean, including the WIO.⁶ Meanwhile, both the EU and France (as a resident power) drive maritime security engagement in the WIO, although their roles differ in scope and method.

The differing conceptualisations of the WIO region directly result in differing and divergent understanding of maritime security challenges in the WIO. These divergent policies, over the years, have frustrated collective efforts to address maritime insecurity in the region. Furthermore, the absence of a shared definition of the WIO opens the space for external powers to project their preferences onto the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ IOC, "Strategic Development Plan 2023–2033: The Indianoceania is a Sharing Prospect", January 2023, at <https://www.commissionoceanindien.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/IOC-Strategic-Development-Plan-English-LR.pdf>.

⁶ Peter Dean, Micheal Green, and Alice Nason, "Modernizing US Indian Ocean Strategy", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol 48, No. 1, 8 April 2025, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2480514>.

region and set the agenda for maritime security, even determining how capacity-building efforts are carried out in the region. As a result, African perspectives and approaches are increasingly marginalised at a time when the region is facing what Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger have termed as a “militarisation dilemma”.⁷ On the one hand, African nations lack the necessary capability and capacity to effectively patrol their maritime zones and are thereby depended on external support. On the other hand, excessive presence of external navies in the WIO region risks importing external power contestations (for example, the US and China and China and India) and undermining regional African maritime initiatives.

Given the competing interests and priorities at play, the task for achieving a unified structure for maritime security in the WIO is challenging. Maritime security in the WIO region will “likely continue to be characterized by a complex network of overlapping initiatives and partnerships.”⁸ A single, monolithic, externally-driven framework for the region is unlikely to work. Rather, the goal is to foster greater coordination, communication, and complementarity between existing and future maritime security initiatives in the region. Furthermore, the region’s wide spectrum of maritime security challenges (ranging from “soft” to “hard” threats) cannot be addressed in isolation. In most instances, external powers, driven by their own national interests, focus on addressing “hard security” threats, whereas “softer security” issues, like climate change and marine pollution, tend to be deprioritised. However, the irony remains that these so-called “softer security” threats

⁷ Christian Bueger and Jan Stockbruegger, “Maritime Security and the Western Indian Ocean’s Militarisation Dilemma”, *African Security Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2022, pp. 195–210.

⁸ Christian Bueger, “Who Secures the Western Indian Ocean? The Need for Strategic Dialogue”, Center for Maritime Strategy, 19 September 2025, at <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/who-secures-the-western-indian-ocean-the-need-for-strategic-dialogue/>.

are the primary maritime security challenges confronting African littorals in the WIO.

Another major issue is that many African countries are still apprehensive about the possibility of the Indo-Pacific concept dragging them into big power rivalries. This would put African leaders in a challenging position of potentially being forced to pick sides. Consequently, the task of maintaining strategic autonomy and exercising agency when dealing with external powers would become more difficult for African nations. While some African nations view the Indo-Pacific as a strategy to balance great power competition, others perceive the concept as being explicitly anti-China, especially in response to China's expanding economic and military influence in the continent. Certain countries, like Kenya, view the concept of Indo-Pacific as a framework to better align their foreign policies with their national interests, seeking to avoid being entangled in a geopolitical struggle and instead aiming for benefiting from strategic partnerships. On the other hand, South Africa views the Indo-Pacific region through a lens of economic opportunity and maritime security, while cautiously navigating great power competition. Peter Fabricius notes that at the "first Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" held in Paris in February 2022, Africa's presence and participation at the forum was "weak" as some African officials had concluded that the gathering was "indeed an anti-Chinese event".⁹ Another challenge is that although the African continent has remained a long-time supporter of the idea of the Indian Ocean as a "Zone of Peace",¹⁰ the continued militarisation of the WIO cannot be reconciled with this concept.¹¹ The growing geopolitical contestation,

⁹ Peter Fabricius, "Africa a Low Presence in the First Indo-Pacific Forum", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 25 February 2022, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-a-low-presence-in-the-first-indo-pacific-forum>.

¹⁰ UN Digital Library, "Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace", 1972, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192075?ln=en&v=pdf>.

¹¹ Marggraff, "Maritime Security in Africa's Western Indian Ocean".

and subsequent increase in militarisation, is one of the most notable trends in the dynamics of the WIO region.

ROLE OF EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE WIO REGION

This section highlights how external and major powers have engaged with the WIO region on maritime security issues.

The US in the WIO

The role of the US in the IOR has been a topic of much debate and scrutiny for quite some time. Following the withdrawal of the UK from the Indian Ocean in 1968, the US assumed the primary responsibility of sustaining the regional maritime order in the IOR. The strategic position of the Indian Ocean in terms of the significance of its SLOCs makes it vital for the littoral and external-regional powers. The emerging geostrategic competition among major powers, like the US, China, and India, in the contemporary era, in this region, also makes it necessary for the concerned African countries to boost their military forces and maritime security capabilities. The US–India maritime partnership “presumes to efficaciously hedge against Chinese naval designs in the Indian Ocean”,¹² particularly in the WIO.

The African continent is important to the US politically, economically, and militarily. Africa’s economy is growing fast and it is ideally situated at the crossroads of international trade and commerce traversing the IOR. Many of the important SLOCs are under the watch of African countries. All this makes Africa and African countries important to the US as these facilitate one-third of the shipping between North America and Asia. Furthermore, these SLOCs are essential to global trade and conduct of ongoing operations. One-third of global oil shipping passes

¹² Huma Amin, “United States Presence in Indian Ocean: Counter Strategy for China”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 14 January 2020, at <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/01/14/united-states-presence-in-indian-ocean-counter-strategy-for-china/>.

through these sea lanes. The US' future security, prosperity, and ability to project power globally rests on free, open, and secure access in and around Africa. The activities of competitor states, violent extremist organisations (VEOs), instability, and fragility, all pose a significant challenge to the US access to the IOR, and the WIO in particular.¹³

Despite these challenges, Africa and its eastern seaboard present several opportunities for the US to advance its own interests as well. The US' and global security depend on the unhindered access to these waters to a large extent.

One of the primary challenges to the US interests in the region is the threat posed by VEOs. Transnational VEOs, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are expanding their footprints in parts of Africa. Al-Shabaab, an Al-Qaeda associate, is carrying out violent activities in East Africa; and Americans and the US interests are considered as priority targets by Al-Shabaab. The strategic geography of East Africa remains vital to the US national security. Despite a determined Chinese effort to assert influence in Djibouti and the region, after the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) opened its first overseas military base in 2017, the US relationship with the Djibouti's federal government remains strong.

There are two primary ways in which the US maintains a significant presence in the IOR and is looking to engage more constructively with African countries in the WIO.

The US Presence in Diego Garcia

Under the Treaty of Paris of 1814, many islands in the Indian Ocean under the control of France were ceded to Britain, including the Chagos

¹³ US Africa Command, "U.S. Africa Command 2021 Posture Statement: Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander, USAFRICOM, before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services", 20 April 2021, at <https://www.africom.mil/document/33691/usafricom-statement-for-record-hasc-20-apr-2021-gen-townsendpdf>.

Islands. In 1965, these islands became the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Diego Garcia is the largest of 55 islands in the Chagos archipelago within the BIOT, which was split off by the UK from its earlier Seychelles and Mauritius colonies. The island, commonly referred to as “footprint of freedom” due to its shape, regional location, and strategic importance, is located very close to the centre of the Indian Ocean.

The plantations on Diego Garcia which were earlier used to produce copra and coconut oils were replaced by the development of the US Navy support facility in 1971. The US Naval Construction Battalions landed on the island in January 1971, to begin constructing and developing the US military base on Diego Garcia. In present times, Diego Garcia is home to 16 separate commands including the U.S. Navy Support Facility.¹⁴ However, the US Navy is central to the operations of all these commands. The island enables the US to project its military strength in a large part of Asia and Africa. It is the most important US base in the Indian Ocean, and is also vital as a refuelling point. In recent years, Diego Garcia has been a critical node for American warfare operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

However, the US and the UK’s presence in Diego Garcia and the Chagos archipelago has been controversial. The outer islands of Mauritius include the islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues, Agalega, Cargados Carajos, and the Chagos Archipelago, including Diego Garcia and any other island comprised in the state of Mauritius. In 2010, Mauritius initiated proceedings against the UK government under the UNCLOS to challenge the legality of their claim. In 2015, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that “the Chagos Marine Protected Area was illegal.”¹⁵ In January 2021, the International Tribunal for Law of the

¹⁴ Brighde Atkison, “Diego Garcia: The Mystery and the Drama”, *Grey Dynamics*, 23 February 2025 at <https://greydynamics.com/diego-garcia-the-mystery-and-the-drama/>.

¹⁵ UN, “Award in the Arbitration regarding the Chagos Marine Protected Area between Mauritius and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland”, Vol. XXXI, 18 March 2015, pp. 359–606, at https://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_XXXI/359-606.pdf.

Sea ruled that: “the United Kingdom has no sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago”; Mauritius is the sovereign there; and the UK should end its unlawful occupation of the territory.¹⁶ Herzinger aptly summarises the situation by stating:

The US is not inclined to abandon its strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean, nor is the UK’s Conservative government prepared to relinquish its claims to this colonial holdover. Both fear the potential consequences of ceding control, being subject to the whims of a state that might evict them from their unsinkable aircraft carrier.¹⁷

It is important to note that the atoll of Diego Garcia acts as a crucial military base that supports the US and the UK’s presence. After intense opposition, the UK handed over sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, including Diego Garcia, to Mauritius, but retained a 99 year lease to operate the military base on the island. This landmark agreement, which provided a formal resolution to the long-standing territorial dispute, was formally signed on 22 May 2025. President Donald Trump also extended his support for the UK and Mauritius agreement on the Chagos archipelago and reiterated that “we [the US] remain responsible for operating the U.S. Naval Support Facility on Diego Garcia, which continues to play a vital role in supporting forward-deployed operational forces and advancing security across the region.”¹⁸

¹⁶ International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, “Dispute Concerning Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary between Mauritius and Maldives in the Indian Ocean: Preliminary Objections”, Judgement No. 28, 28 January 2021, at https://www.itlos.org/fileadmin/itlos/documents/cases/28/preliminary_objections/C28_Judgment_prelimobj_28.01.2021_orig.pdf.

¹⁷ Blake Herzinger, “The Power of Example: America’s Presence in Diego Garcia”, *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 15 February 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/power-example-american-presence-diego-garcia>.

¹⁸ “US Support for UK and Mauritius Agreement on Chagos Archipelago”, Press Statement, US Department of State, 22 May 2025, at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-uk-and-mauritius-agreement-on-chagos-archipelago>.

Exercise Cutlass Express

The foremost way in which the US contributes to maritime security and capacity building in the WIO region is through Exercise Cutlass Express. Cutlass Express is an annual, US Naval Forces Africa-led all-domain exercise in East African coastal region and the WIO. The exercise aims to counter malign influence and aggression along this important maritime region. The 2025 edition of Cutlass Express, which was sponsored by the US Africa Command and conducted by the US Naval Forces Africa, took place from 10 February to 21 February. The exercise took place in the vicinity of Djibouti, Kenya, Madagascar, and Seychelles. It aimed to improve regional cooperation in support of the DCoC, MDA, information sharing between maritime operation centres, maritime interdiction, adherence to rule of law, and counter-proliferation capabilities, in order to disrupt illicit maritime activities and strengthen maritime safety and security in the WIO region.¹⁹ The 2025 edition witnessed the participation of most of the African WIO countries, in addition to India, France, Belgium, and the UK. Such kind of exercises help to build shared understanding of common challenges emanating from the maritime domain and strengthen interoperability between the participating navies in the WIO region.

France in the WIO

France has been the most active player in the IOR for a long time. In many ways, France is an Indian Ocean state and plays a vital role in the region. This is borne out by its overseas territories, where 1.65 million French citizens reside, and its EEZ, spanning 10.2 million square km in the Indo-Pacific. From the late sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, when France was a global maritime power, its colonial empire included several Indian Ocean islands, such as Comoros, Madagascar,

¹⁹ “Exercise Cutlass Express 2025 Launches across East Africa”, US Naval Forces Europe and Africa/US 6th Fleet, 10 February 2025, at <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/4062337/exercise-cutlass-express-2025-launches-across-east-africa/>.

and Réunion (Bourbon Island). In addition, France had many trading posts, such as Pondicherry and Chandernagor in India and Obock in Djibouti. For a brief period of time, Seychelles and Mauritius were also under the French influence.

In present times, only two Indian Ocean islands, namely, Réunion and Mayotte, remain part of France. Both Réunion and Mayotte have the combined status of French department and province. This implies that they are officially part of the French national and sovereign territory. Given France's history as a maritime power, the country has traditionally maintained a high degree of influence in the Indian Ocean. "France's EEZ in the Indian Ocean accounts for more than 10% of the total surface of that ocean, and 20% of France's total EEZ."²⁰ In addition, the French Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI) provide a permanent military presence in La Réunion and Mayotte.²¹ France also provides humanitarian assistance and extends necessary cooperation in situations of calamity and accidents involving oil spills in the region.

There are many factors which continue to drive France to have a permanent and robust presence in the IOR, and the WIO region in particular. First, due to France having retained several scattered territories in the region, it benefits from their exclusive maritime rights and also gains access to seabed products, which have attained centrality in light of recent discoveries of large swathes of oil and gas reserves off the coast of East Africa. Second, the Indian Ocean is strategically located

²⁰ "France and the International Maritime Organization", French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/france-and-the-united-nations/france-and-the-united-nations/france-and-the-international-maritime-organization/#:~:text=France%20is%20a%20leading%20player,areas%20are%20under%20French%20jurisdiction.>

²¹ "France in the South-West Indian Ocean", French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, at [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-indo-pacific-a-priority-for-france/france-in-the-south-west-indian-ocean/.](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-indo-pacific-a-priority-for-france/france-in-the-south-west-indian-ocean/)

on the maritime route between Europe and China. The maritime routes of the Indian Ocean, connecting Europe and China, meet the energy needs of Europe, which continues to be heavily reliant on imported oil and gas. Therefore, the imperative to secure the maritime lanes provides France with a justification for its presence in the region. Maritime activity and trade in the IOR are expected to flourish in the coming years because of the growing demand for oil from emerging economies, like China, India, and South Africa.

Additionally, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz are key maritime chokepoints where activities from a hostile state or illicit transnational crime could drastically impede the free movement of commerce. Therefore, through an enhanced and sustained maritime presence, the French Navy attempts to maintain the region's peace, security, and stability. Due to the discoveries of gas and oil reserves in the WIO region, France is also looking for partnerships with coastal countries. Agathe Maupin points out, "France thus has an interest in developing and securing diplomatic ties with African countries, to avoid a loss of influence in the IOR in the long term."²²

Furthermore, France is a full-fledged member of two important regional organisations that promote dialogue and cooperation in the IOR, namely, the IOC and the IORA. France, through its overseas territory of La Réunion, has been a member of the IOC, alongside Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, and Madagascar, since 1986. The French participation is driven by the desire for La Réunion to fully contribute to regional cooperation within the IOC. "Since its accession, and the first French presidency of the IOC between October 1992 and December 1993, France has furthered its activities within this organisation."²³ As an active member of the IOC, France has well

²² Agathe Maupin, "France in the Indian Ocean: A Geopolitical Perspective and its Implications for Africa", South African Institute for International Affairs, 28 March 2017, at <https://saiia.org.za/research/france-in-the-indian-ocean-a-geopolitical-perspective-and-its-implications-for-africa/>.

²³ "France and the Indian Ocean Commission", French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/regional-based-organisations-of-the-indo-pacific/article/france-and-the-indian-ocean-commission>.

utilised its position for dialogue and deliberations with the other countries of the region, especially on issues of regional cooperation in the Southwest Indian Ocean. The Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency) has substantially contributed to the work of the IOC.²⁴ France has continued to work closely with not only members of the IOC but also other WIO littorals, like Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania, to ensure maritime security in the region.

Through La Réunion's status as a French department, France has also been a "dialogue partner" of the IORA since 2001. Recently, in December 2020, it joined the association as its twenty-third full member. This accession underlined France's desire to become more involved in the Indo-Pacific region. An important indication of France becoming a member of the IORA was evident in the document, "Joint Strategic Vision of India–France Cooperation in Indian Ocean Region", which described France as a "State of the Indian Ocean rim".²⁵ However, although India in principle lent its support to France's accession to the IORA, it was not the case with other members. France "got the key to the IORA only after Iran finally withdrew its reservations."²⁶ The others who opposed France's inclusion to IORA were its former colonies, who were concerned about the country subduing their voices. France's inclusion in the IORA now provides it with multiple opportunities to address various issue areas and concerns of the countries of the region.

France independently conducts counter-piracy naval operations and funds various bilateral and regional capacity-building initiatives. As mentioned earlier, it also works closely with regional organisations,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Joint Strategic Vision of India–France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (New Delhi 10 March, 2018)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 March 2018, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint+Strategic+Vision+of+IndiaFrance+Cooperation+in+the+Indian+Ocean+Region+New+Delhi+10+March+2018>.

²⁶ Devirupa Mitra, "Faraway France Enters Indian Ocean Rim Association as India Backs Move, Iran Eases Off", *The Wire*, 18 December 2020, at <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/indian-ocean-rim-association-iora-france-india-iran>.

such as the IOC and IORA, in addition to participating in forums, such as the IONS, along with African WIO littoral countries and India. This combination of developing bilateral relations to secure economic trade and maritime routes, along with engaging regional organisations in a pragmatic manner, is going to continue to inform France's determination to maintain a presence in the WIO and the larger IOR.

China in the WIO

China's footprint and presence in the IOR, and the WIO in particular, has been steadily growing over the last decade. China's growing forays in the Indian Ocean have been dictated by the imperatives of commerce and a desire to play a more geopolitical and geostrategic role in the region. The earliest indication of Chinese presence and migration to the WIO can be traced back to the early 1800s, especially in Mauritius and Réunion Island. This was part of a historical trend that witnessed the establishment of plantation economies by colonial powers, which resulted in an increasing demand for labour. Later in the nineteenth century, "Chinese labour and merchants arrived in other Western Indian Ocean countries, such as Madagascar and the Seychelles, especially after the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 and the establishment of the French protectorate in Madagascar in 1885."²⁷ In the 1960s, Chinese connections with the WIO countries were motivated by strategic and ideological goals. Fast forward to the turn of the twenty-first century, the Chinese government began implementing its "Going Out" policy and the BRI. These state-sponsored strategies were designed to encourage Chinese influence overseas through massive investments in infrastructure, trade, connectivity, and educational projects.

One of the most important subsets of China's BRI is the concept of twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), unveiled in 2013. The principal aim is "to boost infrastructure connectivity throughout

²⁷ Federica Guccini and Mingyuan Zhang, "'Being Chinese' in Mauritius and Madagascar: Comparing Chinese Diasporic Communities in the Western Indian Ocean", *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2021, at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/968342>.

Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa.”²⁸ The revival of these ancient trade routes along China’s ancient Silk Route connecting China with East Africa and the WIO is being promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping as China’s commitment to Africa. The primary rationale behind such investments is a shared belief of both the Chinese and African leaders that inadequate infrastructure is the biggest bottleneck to Africa’s development. Ever since then, “East Africa has developed into a central node in the Maritime Silk Road, connected by planned and finished ports, pipelines, railways, and power plants built and funded by Chinese companies and lenders.”²⁹

Just like India, the US, and several members of the EU, China too had begun its anti-piracy operations in December 2008, when three surface combatants of the PLAN set sail for the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia, in order to take part in counter-piracy missions off the eastern coast of Africa. This represented the first time in centuries that China had been outside of the Asia-Pacific on an operational deployment. After that, the PLAN began to incrementally increase the scope and sophistication of its counter-piracy operations and deployments in East Africa and the WIO region.³⁰ All of these efforts culminated in the opening of China’s first overseas military base in 2017, in Djibouti, a strategically located country in the Horn of Africa. The first PLAN vessels to visit the base in Djibouti were the Type 071

²⁸ Michael J. Green, “China’s Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region”, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2 April 2018 at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-maritime-silk-road-strategic-and-economic-implications-indo-pacific-region>.

²⁹ Paul Nantulya, “Implications for Africa from China’s One Belt One Road Strategy”, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 19 March 2019, at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/implications-for-africa-china-one-belt-one-road-strategy/>.

³⁰ C.D. Yung, R. Rustici, I. Kardon, and J. Wiseman, “China’s Out of Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions”, China Strategic Perspectives No. 3, Institute for National Strategic Studies, December 2010, at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-3.pdf>.

amphibious transport dock, *Jinggang Shan*, and the mobile landing platform, *Dongbaidao*, which delivered the first troops and personnel to be stationed there.³¹

The construction of the PLAN's support base in Djibouti is considered to be the primary indicator of Chinese military ambitions in the wider IOR, and is also a source of national concern for other actors, like India, the US, and France. China's military base in Djibouti is viewed as the latest move in its mission to project hard and soft power. Chinese officials insist that the facility is intended as a resupply base for the PLAN's "anti-piracy task force" deployment to the Gulf of Aden and is not intended for further projection of military power. However, in reality, the base enables China's military to carry out larger-scale missions in the broader area. Indeed, from the first delivery of troops, China has been augmenting its security presence in a gradual manner. The proximity of the base to the Doraleh Multipurpose Port provides for significant augmentation of the base's operations. The base has a much larger capacity as commercial berths can be made available for most of the PLAN's vessels. "The military base alone is capable of supporting a wide range of PLA operations well beyond logistical support."³² According to recent reports, China's naval base in the East African nation of Djibouti is also now large enough to host aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines; and the country is also looking at other basing opportunities around the African continent.³³

³¹ "The Establishment of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti and the Army Expedition Ceremony held in Zhangjiang", *Xinhua News Agency*, 11 July 2017, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-07/11/c_1121302146.htm.

³² P.A. Dutton, I. Kardon, and C. Kennedy, "Djibouti: China's First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint", CMSI China Maritime Report No. 6, China Maritime Studies Institute, April 2020, at <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

³³ Sam Lagrone, "AFRICOM: Chinese Naval Base in Africa to Support Aircraft Carriers", *US Naval Institute News*, 20 April 2021, at <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/20/africom-chinese-naval-base-in-africa-set-to-support-aircraft-carriers>.

From 2010 onwards, the PLAN has been regularly deploying its hospital ship, *Peace Ark*, in the Horn of Africa and the WIO region. As Joshua White notes, “Many of the same far seas sustainment capabilities that the PLAN has cultivated in its counter-piracy missions have value for humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR) activities as well.”³⁴ China has utilised its *Peace Ark* hospital ship for goodwill missions in the IOR, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been able to undertake basic search and rescue and limited humanitarian airlift missions in response to disasters.

One of the main drivers of China’s security engagement in the African continent has been to present itself as a “responsible” world power. This is being primarily achieved through China’s counter-piracy operations in the WIO and its peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the UN. In addition, China has deployed independently to deter, prevent, and repress acts of piracy in the region, in response to the UN Security Council resolutions that requested for assistance from foreign states. This effort is separate from the multinational joint task force, which works with Operation Atalanta’s counter-piracy mission. China’s security engagement with WIO countries attempts to advance its economic interests in the region. Today, China has become quite adept in blending its trade, investment deals, and cultural exchanges with a mix of other activities, including arms sales, medical assistance, troops training, anti-piracy drills, and so on. Such an approach could be seen in the case of Chinese military base in Djibouti, where deals and development projects were included in the base package deal.³⁵ As a part of the deal, “China built a \$4 billion railway to connect Djibouti with Ethiopia, constructed a \$3.5 billion international free

³⁴ Joshua T. White, “China’s Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investments, Influence and Military Advantage”, Brookings, April 2020, at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf.

³⁵ Judd Devermont, Amelia Cheatham, and Catherine Chiang, “Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan African Ports”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 June 2019, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-risks-chinese-investments-sub-saharan-african-ports>.

trade zone, and funded a \$300 million water pipeline.³⁶ China's counter-piracy operations also serve a dual purpose. They not only help to address insecurities in the region but also enable "China to secure maritime shipments along major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) linking Africa to Chinese ports."³⁷ Such a form of blended approach to security is likely to continue to inform Chinese security engagements in Africa.³⁸

China's increasing forays in the WIO have been a source of concern for other regional countries. One of the major concerns has been Chinese marine exploitation of African waters through IUU fishing. African countries face economic challenges in monitoring, control, and surveillance of their maritime domain. Even in countries where foreign vessels are banned from buying fishing licences, Chinese trawlers regularly use shell companies to disguise their ownership. These trawlers operate close to the shore, which puts the industrial fishing vessels in direct conflict with local, artisanal, small-scale fishermen who depend on fisheries for their livelihood and sustenance. This is a matter of great concern for African states as fisheries accounts for a significant portion of the GDP of WIO region states. According to the World Wildlife Fund, countries like Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania, and South Africa incur massive financial losses due to IUU fishing, particularly of shrimp and tuna species. Potentially, US\$ 142.8 million worth of income was lost from the Southwest Indian Ocean region between the period 2015–21.³⁹

³⁶ Istvan Tarrosy and Zoltan Voros, "The China-built Addis–Djibouti Railways Gains Steam", *The Diplomat*, 14 February 2024, at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/the-china-built-addis-djibouti-railway-gains-steam/>.

³⁷ Devermont, Cheatham, and Chiang, "Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan African Ports", p. 6.

³⁸ Paul Nantulya, "China's Blended Approach to Security in Africa", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 22 July 2021, at <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-blended-approach-security-africa-31216>.

³⁹ "US\$ 142.8 Million Potentially Lost Each Year to Illicit Fishing in the South-West Indian Ocean", World Wildlife Fund, 4 May 2023, at <https://www.wwf.eu/?10270441/US1428-million-potentially-lost-each-year-to-illicit-fishing-in-the-South-West-Indian-Ocean>.

Consequently, it has become imperative for regional countries and organisations, like the IOTC and the IORA, to cooperate and support the WIO littorals by enhancing their capabilities to conduct monitoring and surveillance so as to ensure that sustainable fishing practices are followed in the IOR, and the WIO in particular. Furthermore, China's construction of ports along the east coast of Africa, under its MSR initiative, has been viewed with caution by external observers. Although it seems improbable that China would use these new ports in African waters for outright military activities, the tendency and willingness to use investments as political leverage to shore up its force projection capabilities in the IOR cannot be overlooked.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN INTERESTS IN THE WIO

The growing presence of a number of external actors and the ensuing geopolitical competition for power and influence in the WIO presents India with significant challenges. Traditionally, India has considered the IOR as its “backyard” and has maintained and developed friendly relationships with all of the IOR's littorals. This has been especially true in the case of East African countries, where India has enjoyed a long history of maritime and trade links. Eastern and Southern Africa are also home to a substantial number of Indian diaspora. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that India views East Africa, encompassing the WIO region, as its gateway to continental Africa, and is invested in the peace, stability, and security of the region. However, with a multitude of actors now occupying or attempting to increase their footprint in this important maritime space, India is being challenged. The foremost challenge for India is the growing presence and rapid expansion of the PLAN in the Indian Ocean.

In 2020, the PLAN surpassed the US Navy to become the largest navy in the world in terms of the total number of warships commissioned.⁴⁰ The Chinese Navy is, indeed, investing heavily in shipbuilding, military

⁴⁰ Ronald O'Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities-Background and Issues for Congress”, *Congress.Gov*, RL33153, 24 April 2025 at <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33153>.

capability, modernisation of forces, and command structure. China usually sends to the Indian Ocean its Type 052C destroyer, Type 054A frigate, and supply ship as part of its anti-piracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia.⁴¹ However, what has been the main cause of alarm for India is the sighting of Chinese intelligence and survey ships off the coast of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands.⁴² This is becoming a regular feature and poses a challenge for India as it allows the Chinese to systematically map the seabed across the vast swathe of the Indian Ocean. Thus, rather than the quantum of China's deployments in the IOR, it is the nature of these deployments which is raising alarms. Under the cloak of its "benign" deployments in the region, the Chinese Navy is, in fact, conducting surveillance operations in the IOR to learn about the strategic dynamics and hydrological conditions in the region. This is indicative of China's willingness and desire to have a long-term presence in the region. China's intent behind increasing its presence in the IOR is guided by its desire to develop an understanding and assessment of other countries' operational capacities by observing them in their respective waters. In the Indian Ocean, it is unlikely that China is pursuing any form of full-spectrum domination strategy, but rather a strategy of incremental control.

China, initially, is looking to shore up its stakes in the Indian Ocean by studying the operational environment. Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean tend to spend a lot of time in South Asia, around Andaman and Nicobar Islands or the Sri Lankan waters, before eventually venturing into the WIO. The motive behind such operations lies in the

⁴¹ "China Deploys New Missile Destroyer, Frigate in its Anti-piracy Fleet", *The Economic Times*, 4 April 2019, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-deploys-new-missile-destroyer-frigate-in-its-anti-piracy-fleet/articleshow/68724333.cms?from=mdr>.

⁴² Abhinav Gupta, "China Ramps Up 'Research' Ship Presence in Indian Ocean: Are these Vessels Masking Military Intent Near India?", *Moneycontrol*, 28 November 2025, at <https://www.moneycontrol.com/world/china-ramps-up-research-ship-presence-in-indian-ocean-are-these-vessels-masking-military-intent-near-india-article-13702175.html>.

Chinese desire to understand the bathymetry, that is, the measurement of depth of waters in oceans and seas, and temperature profile in these waters, in order to utilise such knowledge and conduct such operations that would give China the opportunity to maintain and sustain its long-term presence in the Indian Ocean. For India, this presents a direct challenge to its aspirations to become a “net security provider” or “preferred security partner” for the IOR littorals. As the PLAN’s ability to maintain and sustain its presence in the Indian Ocean is enhanced, India’s freedom of navigation may get restricted. This could soon overcome the advantages of geography that India currently enjoys in the Indian Ocean. In many ways, China has been successful in combining a series of measures on the infrastructural developmental front (through the BRI and MSR by funding and constructing ports, like Lamu in Kenya) with diplomacy, and increased naval deployments, to become a force that could de facto dominate the WIO region.⁴³

India’s official position regarding the presence of regional and extra-regional powers in the IOR was made evident as far back as 2015. During a visit to Mauritius and Seychelles in 2015, PM Modi said that “...those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean...we recognize that there are other nations around the world, with strong interests and stakes in the region.”⁴⁴

Meanwhile, France’s sustained presence in the WIO has been welcomed by the Indian security establishment. Although both the countries enjoy

⁴³ Abhishek Mishra, “A Chinese-built Port in the Indian Ocean: The Story of Kenya’s Lamu Port”, Observer Research Foundation, 1 June 2021, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/a-chinese-built-port-in-the-indian-ocean-the-story-of-kenyas-lamu-port/>.

⁴⁴ “Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius (March 12, 2015)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 March 2015, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/Prime_Ministers_Remarks_at_the_Commissioning_of_Offshore_Patrol_Vessel_OPV_Barracuda_in_Mauritius_March_12_2015.

a strategic partnership, they lack a regional dimension for their ties.⁴⁵ Securing cooperation in the WIO could fill this gap. Already, India and France have expressed interest to collaborate on third-country projects in the WIO littorals in several areas, like port connectivity, blue economy, tourism, skill development, connectivity, and healthcare, among others.⁴⁶ The Indian Navy and the French Navy have jointly conducted patrols off Réunion Island in the WIO, in March 2020 and May 2022.⁴⁷ The Indian Navy's P-8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft has been deployed for carrying out patrolling operations with French personnel on board. These joint patrols have helped to strengthen interoperability between the two partners and enhanced their MDA capabilities in the region, which is useful for surveillance and monitoring of foreign ships and illicit activities in the maritime domain, which is particularly widespread in the WIO region. For this reason, both the sides have agreed to strengthen maritime surveillance through the exchange of information between IFC-IOR in Gurugram, Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), Seychelles, and RMIFC, Madagascar.⁴⁸ Additionally, India and France have been conducting annual VARUNA maritime exercises for a number of years. The latest edition was held in March 2025, in the Western Arabian Sea, under which a wide array of naval

⁴⁵ “Joint Strategic Vision of India–France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (New Delhi, 10 March 2018)”.

⁴⁶ “India, France Explore 3rd Country Projects in Western Indian Ocean Region”, Indo-French Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 19 March 2019, at <https://www.ifcci.org.in/communication/news/n/news/india-france-explore-3rd-country-projects-in-western-indian-ocean-region.html>.

⁴⁷ Dinakar Peri, “India, France Carry Out Second Joint Patrol in Southern Indian Ocean”, *The Hindu*, 16 May 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-france-carry-out-second-joint-patrol-in-southern-indian-ocean/article65419890.ece>.

⁴⁸ Dinakar Peri, “India and France for Coordinated Surveillance in Indian Ocean Region”, *The Hindu*, 21 January 2025, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-and-france-to-work-together-on-maritime-surveillance-in-indian-ocean-region/article69123687.ece>.

operations at sea and anti-submarine exercises were conducted and best practices shared.⁴⁹

India also desires to increase maritime security partnership with the US in the IOR in priority areas, such as information sharing, MDA, building on mechanisms like the IPMDA, and strengthening linkages with IFC-IOR in Gurugram. Apart from improving coordinated response for HADR, search and rescue operations, and anti-piracy patrols, both the sides intend to conduct regular bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, like MALABAR, PASSEX, and those under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and MILAN framework, in order to refine joint warfighting, logistics, and sustainment.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the Indian Navy is one of the international training partners and regularly participates in the US AFRICOM-directed multilateral naval exercise, Cutlass Express, which works towards promoting maritime security, coordination, and information exchange among the WIO countries. Under this, the Indian Navy trains the contingents from various participating African navies in various fields across the spectrum of maritime security operations.

The presence and role of a regional power like France in the WIO does not pose any direct security threat to India. On the contrary, India and France have expressed their desire to work together in order to play a greater role in collaborating with African countries and shaping the maritime security architecture in the WIO region. With the US too, there are many opportunities for both India and the US to explore and collaborate. “The signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with U.S. in August 2016 has been beneficial

⁴⁹ “Culmination of Bilateral Maritime Exercise – VARUNA 2025”, *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 24 March 2025 at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2114535®=3&lang=2>.

⁵⁰ “Indian Navy Chief Discusses Deepening Maritime Ties, Indo-Pacific Security with Top US Officials”, *Indian Defence Research Wing*, 15 November 2025, at <https://idrw.org/indian-navy-chief-discusses-deepening-maritime-ties-indo-pacific-security-with-top-us-officials/>.

for Indian warships operating in Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.”⁵¹ Through this agreement, the Indian Navy’s warships are able to refuel at sea from the US Navy tankers deployed in the region, which helps the Indian Navy to maintain sustained blue-water naval presence in the WIO. Additionally, the US could also play a more pivotal role in the Indian Ocean since it has been an active dialogue partner of the IORA since 2012. Now that France too has become a full-fledged member of the IORA, through its department of Réunion, there are ample opportunities for India, France, and the US to work together for ensuring freedom of navigation and shared mutual prosperity in the WIO region. However, it is China’s increasing forays in the WIO that have become a source of concern and consternation for all these powers. The Chinese tendency to prop up African elites, secure deals on low interest rates, and the rapid pace of infrastructure construction have made other powers question its motives. Moreover, although no direct evidence of asset seizure in Africa has presented itself, the non-transparent nature of Chinese deals, confidentiality clauses, and increasing Chinese unilateralism and belligerence have served to caution regional powers about China’s exact motivations and strategy in the WIO region.

⁵¹ Abhishek Mishra, “Exercise Cutlass 2021: Prospects of Alignment of Indo-U.S. Interests in Western Indian Ocean”, Observer Research Foundation, 9 August 2021, at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/exercise-cutlass-2021>.

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have highlighted how and why the Indo-Pacific construct is increasingly gaining traction as a strategic framework. Nations are striving to proactively position themselves and engage with the emerging concept of the Indo-Pacific. Due to the interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, any development in the region directly impacts African climate, marine resources, and economic stability. Despite 38 out of 54 African nations boasting a coastline, or being an island nation, both on the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, they are yet to actively engage with the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Of particular interest and consequence is how the African WIO littorals are engaging with this framework. The WIO is, once again, emerging as a focal point of international security concerns following the spate of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in late 2023 and the parallel resurgence of piracy off the Somalian coast.

Various mechanisms, strategies, and institutions aimed at addressing maritime security threats already exist in the WIO, but African countries have still found it difficult to develop any formal national or regional position on the Indo-Pacific. However, there is now a growing recognition of the need to articulate African national priorities, particularly by African members of the IORA. This includes all the WIO littorals, like Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Seychelles, Mauritius, Comoros, and Madagascar. Following the adoption of the IORA “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” in November 2022, there is now a growing recognition among African members of the IORA of the importance of clarifying their interests, roles, and intentions in the Indo-Pacific.¹ Moreover, India’s assumption of the

¹ IORA, “IORA’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific”, 24 November 2022, at <https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-03/indo-pacific-outlook.pdf>. (Accessed on 21 January 2026).

IORA chairmanship from 2025 to 2027 provides a golden opportunity for African states to promote inter-regional cooperation and find synergies between Africa's Blue Economy Strategy, the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and the Pacific island states 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.²

Among African WIO littorals, the task of developing strategic thinking on the Indo-Pacific at a domestic level is at a nascent stage.³ However, it is the IORA, being an “apex body of the Indian Ocean” and having all African states on the Indian Ocean coastline as members, that is best positioned to collectively promote African interests/positions on the evolving Indo-Pacific concept. Some statements from African leaders over the past few years attest to Africa's growing recognition of collaborating with Indo-Pacific partners. For instance, in 2024, during the Third EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Meeting, Somalia's Acting Foreign Minister Ali Mohamed Omar highlighted the need to collaborate with Indo-Pacific partners in addressing regional stability and upholding international law.⁴ Somalia's strategic thinking, however, continues to be primarily concerned with security issues rather than developing any comprehensive outlook; still, it is demonstrating a growing awareness of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific.

² Nicole du Plessis, Matthew Carr, KGame Molohe, and Juliet Hermes, “Africa on the Indo-Pacific: The IORA Indo-Pacific Strategy as a Marine Science Catalyst for African Prosperity and Opportunity”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 5 December 2025, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2025.2585654?src=#abstract>. (Accessed on 20 January 2026).

³ Lisa Otto and Timothy Moeng, “Overlooked and Forgotten: Seeking a Place for Africa in the Indo-Pacific”, *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, 17 November 2025, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2025.2579401>. (Accessed on 20 January 2026).

⁴ “Somalia Raises Concerns about Regional Stability at EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum”, *Somali Magazine*, 5 February 2024, at <https://somalimagazine.so/somalia-raises-concerns-about-regional-stability-at-eu-indo-pacific-ministerial-forum/>. (Accessed on 3 January 2026).

Kenya is one of the leading countries that has developed positions on the Indo-Pacific.⁵ Way back in 2013, former President Jomo Kenyatta noted that “Kenya’s prosperity is tied to economic activities in the Indo-Pacific.”⁶ Furthermore, Monica Juma, NSA to Kenyan President William Ruto, endorsed a Kenyan position on the Indo-Pacific in March 2023, when she spoke of working towards “greater prosperity in the grand sphere of our shared maritime domains...”⁷ for all nations to interact in a free open world guided by the rule of law and where multilateralism truly prevails.⁸ Kenyan leaders have also raised concern about transnational organised crimes and the growing militarisation of the Red Sea. Furthermore, Kenya and India have agreed on a joint vision of furthering maritime cooperation in the IOR through BAHARI, meaning “ocean” in Swahili.⁹ It is hoped that other African WIO states will follow a similar model of engaging constructively with India on maritime security issues in the coming years.

⁵ Brendon J. Cannon and Stephen Mogaka, “Kenya and the Indo-Pacific: The Rationale for an ‘Outlook’ and Why Kenya (and East Africa) Matters”, Institute for Security and Development Policy, 18 April 2023, at <https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Brief-April-18-2023-Kenya-final-TUESDAY.pdf>. (Accessed on 10 January 2026).

⁶ Stephen Mogaka, “Mogaka and Cannon: Why Kenya Needs an Indo-Pacific Outlook”, *The Star*, Kenya, 3 April 2024, at <https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/eastern/2024-04-03-mogaka-and-cannon-why-kenya-needs-an-indo-pacific-outlook>. (Accessed on 18 January 2026).

⁷ Monica Juma, “...greater prosperity in the grand sphere of our shared maritime domains”, Tweet, 1 March 2023, at <https://x.com/AmbMonicaJuma/status/1631249614283177985>. (Accessed on 18 January 2026).

⁸ Monica Juma, “...for all nations to interact in a free open world guided by the rule of law and where multilateralism truly prevails”, Tweet, 1 March 2023, at <https://x.com/AmbMonicaJuma/status/1631249614283177985>. (Accessed on 18 January 2026).

⁹ “India–Kenya Joint Vision Statement on Maritime Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region—BAHARI”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 5 December 2023, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37341/India_Kenya_Joint_Vision_Statement_on_Maritime_Cooperation_in_the_Indian_Ocean_Region__BAHARI. (Accessed on 8 January 2026).

Tanzania's discourse is yet to have a prominent Indo-Pacific focus, but the country is closely engaging with India on maritime security and blue economy issues. During President Samia Suluhu Hassan's visit to New Delhi in October 2023, India and Tanzania agreed to cooperate under the framework of the IORA to ensure a "peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable Indian Ocean Region",¹⁰ and to work jointly towards the implementation of the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Greater defence engagement, joint EEZ surveillance, and hydrographic surveys are now a regular feature of engagement. Following the demise of former President John Magufuli and under the leadership of President Hassan, Tanzania is now beginning to re-engage with international partners, such as India, providing an opportunity to engage constructively on the Indo-Pacific.¹¹ This is also evidenced by the TPDF being the Indian Navy's co-host for the AIKEYME multilateral maritime exercise, involving all other African WIO states, in April 2025.

Mozambique, with its "vast offshore gas reserves in the Rovuma basin"¹², has emerged as a strategic partner for India in the WIO region. Although Mozambique does not have any clear policy framework on the Indo-Pacific, the country's strategic location along the Mozambique Channel, its resource-rich waters containing valuable fisheries, and offshore gas reserves make Maputo an important Indo-Pacific partner for a country like India. Indian firms, like ONGC Videsh, have made significant investments in the hope of transforming the nation into a

¹⁰ "Joint Statement during the State Visit of the President of Tanzania to India and Launch of Strategic Partnership between India and Tanzania (8–10 October 2023)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 8 October 2023, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37174/Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_the_President_of_Tanzania_to_India_and_launch_of_Strategic_Partnership_between_India_and_Tanzania_810. (Accessed on 10 January 2026).

¹¹ Otto and Moeng, "Overlooked and Forgotten: Seeking a Place for Africa in the Indo-Pacific".

¹² "Mozambique's Energy Comeback Sets Stage for Regional Energy Transformation", African Energy Week, 6 November 2025 at <https://aecweek.com/mozambiques-lng-comeback-sets-stage-for-regional-energy-transformation/>. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

top-tier liquified natural gas (LNG) exporter. Furthermore, India has been actively supporting Mozambique's maritime security activities by regularly gifting patrol vessels, like fast interceptor crafts, and conducting joint training and capacity building for Mozambican agencies and officials. Recently, New Delhi has extended US\$ 772 million line of credit to Mozambique for procuring "Made in India" defence equipment.¹³

South Africa is also an important Indo-Pacific partner, although it does not have any domestic strategy on the Indo-Pacific. However, it locates its approach via the IORA, for which Pretoria provided the initial concept.¹⁴ Lisa Otto and Timothy Moeng note, "while South Africa broadly supports the rules-based order, it is also a proponent of nonalignment and advocates for a multipolar system, which may well be a basis for its Indo-Pacific engagement."¹⁵ South Africa's desire to maintain its international stature may well result in a more proactive engagement on the Indo-Pacific, whether through the IORA or bilaterally with partners, such as India. However, its maritime sector, especially the South African Navy, continually faces chronic underfunding, leading to diminished operational capacity. "The Chief of the South African Navy, Vice Admiral Monde Lobese" recently lamented that "our prolonged absence at sea due to non-availability of ships and submarines all because of under-resourcing of our Navy should concern you as fellow patriots and South Africans."¹⁶

¹³ "English Translation of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar's Interview to Noticias, Mozambique (17 April 2023)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 17 April 2023, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/37229>. (Accessed on 8 January 2026).

¹⁴ Anil Sooklal, "The IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Building Partnerships for Mutual Cooperation and Sustainable Development", *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, Vol 19, No. 3, 12 September 2023, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2023.2252189>. (Accessed on 11 January 2026).

¹⁵ Otto and Moeng, "Overlooked and Forgotten: Seeking a Place for Africa in the Indo-Pacific".

¹⁶ "SA Navy Chief Bemoans Funding Shortfall, is Reprimanded for It", *DefenceWeb*, 18 November 2025, at <https://defenceweb.co.za/sa-defence-sa-defence/sa-navy-chief-bemoans-funding-shortfall/>. (Accessed on 4 February 2026).

The island nation of Comoros does not have an official position on the Indo-Pacific but is a close partner of China, which is its largest development partner. In the case of Madagascar, former President Andry Rajoelina had embraced the concept of FOIP and expressed desire to maintain a free and open maritime order.¹⁷ Additionally, Madagascar has been regularly conducting joint naval exercises and port calls with India and other key Indo-Pacific nations. However, following the recent overthrow of the Malagasy government due to the Gen Z protests that ousted President Rajoelina and led to the installation of a military junta, Madagascar could emerge as an attractive location for external powers to set up a military base or naval dual-use facilities.¹⁸ Consequently, the task of balancing between foreign powers' shifting strategies in the Indo-Pacific will be challenging for Madagascar.

Mauritius and Seychelles, being two SIDS in the Indian Ocean sitting astride critical SLOCs, have attracted the attention of various major powers. For Mauritius, a nation that is “endowed with an EEZ of 2.3 million square kilometres”, the task of ensuring security in its maritime domain is difficult. It supports the FOIP concept and its maritime security agenda emphasises “issues relating to sovereignty, control of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the development of Blue Economy, the depletion of fish stocks caused by Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, climate change and the rise of sea level and drug trafficking”.¹⁹ The UK's presence in the Chagos archipelago, which

¹⁷ “Foreign Minister Kamikawa's Courtesy Call on President Rajoelina of Madagascar”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 28 April 2024, at https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/mg/pageite_000001_00002.html. (Accessed on 4 February 2026).

¹⁸ Rateb Raiyaan Bhuiyan, “What the Coup in Madagascar Means for Indo-Pacific”, *Modern Diplomacy*, 9 November 2025, at <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2025/11/09/what-the-coup-in-madagascar-means-for-indo-pacific/>. (Accessed on 20 January 2026).

¹⁹ Maneesh Gobin, “Maritime Security in the Western Indian Ocean Region: A Perspective from Mauritius”, *NatStrat*, 22 June 2024, at <https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/maritime-security-in-the-western-indian-ocean-region-a-perspective-from-mauritius-145.html>. (Accessed on 22 January 2026).

has been a sore point for Mauritius, and the construction of naval facilities by India in Agalega Island off the Mauritian coast point to the opportunities its strategic location offers. Furthermore, Mauritius hosts the IORA Secretariat in Ebene and plays an important role in the IORA's activities in the region. The country shares a close and comprehensive strategic partnership with India and stands at the junction of India's SAGAR (now MAHASAGAR) vision, its "Neighbourhood First" approach, and its commitment to the Global South. Mauritius is also considered as India's gateway to continental Africa.²⁰

Another important small island state in the WIO is Seychelles, whose distinct foreign policy is driven by embracing a blend of pluralism and pragmatism.²¹ This island nation is a key innovator in ocean governance and promotes blue economy both at home and abroad.²² However, due to the strong geostrategic competition for influence in the neighbourhood of Seychelles, it has "taken a cautious and selective approach to the Indo-Pacific framework", reflecting the island nation's long-standing stance of "positive non-alignment".²³ For both Mauritius and Seychelles, maintaining the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, stability, and prosperity is critical at a time when the region is witnessing growing

²⁰ "India–Mauritius Joint Vision for an Enhanced Strategic Partnership", *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 12 March 2025, at <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2110718®=3&lang=2>. (Accessed on 16 January 2026).

²¹ Christian Bueger, "Small Island States in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities for Seychelles", *Seychelles Research Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2022, at https://seychellesresearchjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/small_island_states_in_the_indo-pacific-challenges_and_opportunities_for_seychelles-christian_bueger-srj-4-1.pdf. (Accessed on 9 February 2026).

²² Sedrick Nicette, "Seychelles Pushes Blue Economy Agenda with Key Boundary and Conservation Training", *Seychelles News Agency*, 17 December 2024, at <http://www.seychellesnewsagency.com/articles/21691/Seychelles+pushes+Blue+Economy+agenda+with+key+boundary+and+conservation+training>. (Accessed on 9 February 2026).

²³ Lisa Otto, "India's Ocean: Indian Maritime Diplomacy in the African Maritime Domain", in Timothy Stapleton (ed.), *African Navies: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 131–46, London: Routledge.

militarisation from major powers, which could subsequently undermine regional African efforts to tackle maritime insecurities. The best way forward is for the SIDS to exert collective agency through institutions, like the IORA and the IOC, and balance power between external partners in order to convey their national priorities in a unified voice on the international stage. Otherwise, external powers will continue to remain the agenda and norm-setters in the Indo-Pacific.

The year 2025 also marked the end of AU's Decade of African Seas and Oceans (2015–25). The role of African states in global ocean governance efforts is central with continental initiatives, like the AU's AIMS 2050, the Lomé Charter of 2016, and the Revised African Maritime Transport Charter, which provide a model for regional cooperation. However, most of these initiatives were signed years back and require urgent review in order to better reflect the continent's maritime security challenges. Although the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) has engaged on maritime security issues, "maritime security issues has not been institutionalised through regular policy reviews or sustained budget lines."²⁴

The international community has been looking towards African states to engage proactively on three global initiatives: High Seas Treaty (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction [BBNJ]); the World Trade Organization's (WTO) fisheries subsidies agreement; and deep-sea mining regulations. However, the results have been disappointing. So far, only seven African nations, like Seychelles, Mauritius, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Cape Verde, have ratified the BBNJ treaty, resulting in severe under-representation of African voices on matters of high seas governance.²⁵ Deep-sea mining regulations too could negatively affect

²⁴ Timothy Walker and Denys Reva, "With Three Bold Moves, Maritime Security in Africa could be Plain Sailing", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 16 September 2025, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/with-three-bold-moves-maritime-security-in-africa-could-be-plain-sailing>. (Accessed on 9 February 2026).

²⁵ David Willima, "How Africa can make 2025 its 'Super Year' for Ocean Governance", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 3 February 2025, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/how-africa-can-make-2025-its-super-year-for-ocean-governance>. (Accessed on 11 February 2026).

African economies and marine ecosystems, which are already threatened by climate change and pollution. Even the 2022 WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies lacks sufficient African support, despite illegal fishing costing the African continent US\$ 11 billion annually.²⁶

Tackling Africa's maritime priorities at the level of the AU continues to be hampered by several factors, including "widespread gaps in implementation, coordination and political commitment",²⁷ chronic underfunding, and overdependence on international partners for capacity-building initiatives. It is imperative for African nations to course correct, and certain steps could be undertaken in this direction. First, the AU's 2050 AIMS must be revised to address emerging threats, like cyberattacks, maritime terrorism, trafficking, and vulnerabilities in critical maritime infrastructure. All such threats are now outpacing African capacities to respond at national, regional, and international level. Simply relying on strategies without demonstrating practical readiness and implementing actionable points will remain counterproductive. Second, the AU's PSC must look to convene more frequently on issues relating to maritime security. In this regard, the current A3 (three African UN Security Council members, namely, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Algeria) should champion maritime issues and take lead on coordination.²⁸ Since African maritime issues currently span several African Union Commission (AUC) departments, a dedicated maritime security expert group could provide technical expertise to AU member states and improve inter-departmental coordination. Third, the AUC should seek to conduct a maritime command post exercise—Amani Africa III—which is the AU's training and evaluation exercise under the umbrella of the African Standby Force.²⁹ This would help to plan, deploy, and manage collective responses to Africa's maritime security challenges.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Timothy Walker, "Sink or Swim: Africa's Crucial Maritime Milestones in 2025", ISS, Pretoria, South Africa, 16 January 2025, at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sink-or-swim-africa-s-crucial-maritime-milestones-in-2025>. (Accessed on 11 February 2026).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Walker and Reva, "With Three Bold Moves, Maritime Security in Africa could be Plain Sailing".

It is clear that the task of developing clear and defined African positions on the Indo-Pacific is at a nascent stage. Although there is some evidence of African support (albeit not universally) for the concept of FOIP due to apprehensions of being drawn into great power contestation, it is clear that African leaders and states cannot afford to remain passive bystanders.³⁰ Proactive engagement with Indo-Pacific partners, particularly countries like India, will ensure Africa's inclusion in the rule-setting and partnership-building processes. African countries have a good opportunity to become proactive participants in the decision-making process by voicing their priorities and interests in regional forums, like the IORA. India's chairmanship of the IORA (2025–27) may provide this opportunity, advancing the maritime security interests of both India and African WIO nations. Moreover, certain initiatives, like the “Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa”, announced in August 2025 during the Ninth TICAD Summit between Japan and Africa, will be instrumental in promoting African WIO littorals economic integration, industrial development, as well as foster trilateral partnerships between India, Africa, and Japan.³¹ India can become the logistical hub for Japanese companies aiming to enter African markets.

It is also important to acknowledge that African WIO littorals and their leaders may be unwilling to accept any externally driven initiative. Simply relying on India's goodwill and image as a benign power may not be enough to secure the acceptance of the Indo-Pacific construct. In this endeavour, the role of academia and research think tanks is paramount, particularly to bridge the present knowledge asymmetry between India and African nations. India's select think tanks, such as

³⁰ Otto and Moeng, “Overlooked and Forgotten: Seeking a Place for Africa in the Indo-Pacific”.

³¹ “Announcement of ‘Economic Region Initiative of Indian Ocean-Africa’”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 20 August 2025, at https://www.mofa.go.jp/ic/ap_m/pageite_000001_01171.html. (Accessed on 16 February 2026).

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA),³² National Maritime Foundation (NMF), Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), Gateway House, and Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), should prepare the ground by engaging their counterparts in Africa, like ISS, South African Institute of International Affairs, Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies, Amani Africa, and African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD). Organising a think tank conclave or 'Track I.5' or 'Track II' dialogue in certain cities, like Nairobi, Cape Town, or Port Louis, could provide a valuable platform for researchers, academics, and practitioners from African and Indian side working on maritime security issues to exchange ideas. If the idea of Indo-Pacific gets defined and endorsed in such conclaves and if the African media takes ample notice of it, then it could have a suitable impact on the thinking and actions of African governments.

³² The MP-IDSA is best suited to initiate such a dialogue from the Indian side due to its rich history of conducting five editions of India–Africa Strategic Dialogue (IASD), conducting “Africa Day” celebrations annually, and facilitating the India–Africa Security Fellowship Programme, which was launched in 2022 to strengthen defence research cooperation between African and Indian counterparts. For more on the IASD, see <https://idsa.in/idsa-event/event-report-5th-india-africa-strategic-dialogue-on-india-and-africa-partnership-in-the-next-decade>. For more on the India-Africa Security Fellowship Programme at MP-IDSA, see <https://idsa.in/india-africa-security-fellowship-programme-at-mp-idsa>.

From an African perspective, literature on maritime security and the Indo-Pacific is very limited. Any discussion on Africa's inclusion and role in the Indo-Pacific discourse is at a nascent stage. The maritime security aspects and challenges facing African countries situated in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region have thus far not been adequately explored in the existing literature. The scholarly debates and international responses have tended to focus mostly on piracy in African waters. Piracy has sensitised both Africa and the international community to the threats off Africa, but it has also skewed perceptions about Africa's maritime landscape. Despite that, maritime security in an African context has been increasingly assuming prominence in the African security agenda. This monograph studies, analyses, and highlights the imperative for African countries in the WIO region to integrate themselves and play a constructive role in the emerging Indo-Pacific debate. It also attempts to find out the ways through which African countries in the WIO region could benefit by developing common positions on the Indo-Pacific based on shared interests and principles. Such a study is important because multilateralism matters for African states as it gives them the best chance to pool resources and ideas to influence global decisions and ensure that their voices are factored in discussions that have a bearing on the continent's growth and development.

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