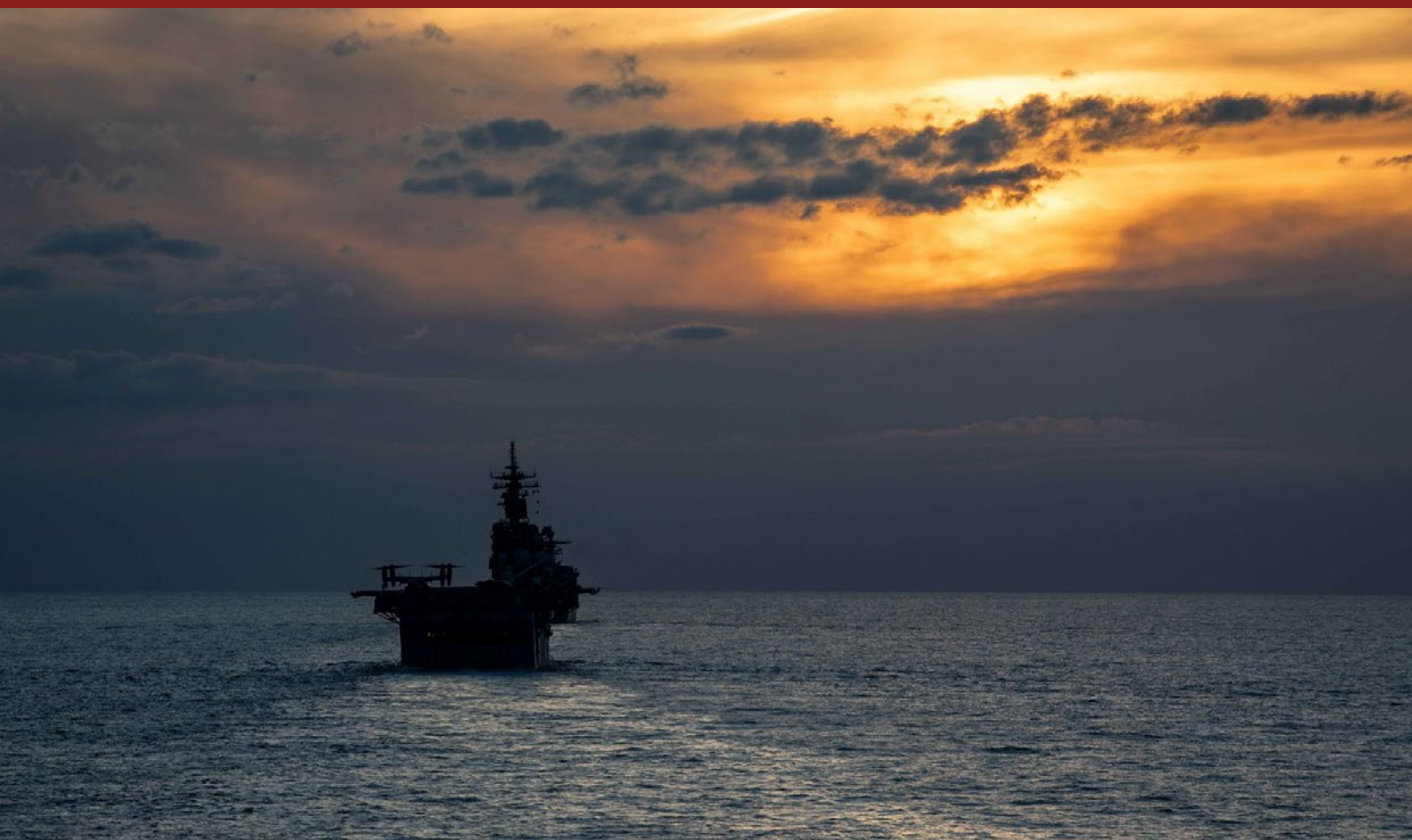


The Great Game is afloat

Africa and Indian Ocean geopolitics

Leaza Jernberg



African states and organisations must pay careful attention to the Indo-Pacific concept and how it is being applied in practice. The concept has increased in popularity as a lens through which to approach worldwide policymaking and strategic thinking. It should be viewed against the backdrop of increasingly competitive global power shifts that could have significant geopolitical implications in the Indian Ocean region. African countries must ensure that their concerns and interests are not marginalised.

Key findings

- ▶ Given the centrality of the Indo-Pacific to the world's economy, trade and security, global powers have steadily increased their presence in the region.
- ▶ Several countries seek to play a more active role in security and development as part of their Indo-Pacific strategies, but without enhancing their engagement with African Indian Ocean littoral states.
- ▶ Should any state move more rapidly and aggressively to secure its energy and trade supply chains, this could further militarise the region, raising the potential for conflict and affecting all states in the Indian Ocean littoral and beyond.
- ▶ The growing geopolitical competition between traditional great powers such as Great Britain, France, and the United States and emerging powers such as China and India may result in a security dilemma that undermines common interests reflected in the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063.
- ▶ The inability of African states to protect their maritime interests could increase the likelihood of extra-regional involvement, including private security companies and foreign militaries.
- ▶ Most states pursuing the Indo-Pacific approach have included a development component that could see significant investments in Africa's critical infrastructure, such as ports, but neglect to state how these could benefit Africa's development strategies.
- ▶ The four African island countries in the Indian Ocean, Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros and Seychelles, provide several best practices and lessons essential in creating an African position on the Indo-Pacific region.

Recommendations

- ▶ African states must develop a clear conception of their interests, facilitated by multilateral organisations, including the AU, within the emerging Indo-Pacific region to achieve their long-term security and development objectives.
- ▶ African states must ensure that Indo-Pacific strategies speak to the objectives of the AU's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy as well as the various regional maritime strategies.
- ▶ African states should leverage their membership in multinational organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association to prioritise African security and development concerns. This will also help some African countries overcome the lack of capacity and capability to respond to maritime security threats.
- ▶ On the regional level, the AU and regional economic communities must develop a clear conception of their members' mutual and competing interests and strategies to achieve these. This will go far in supporting member states' ability to engage with the traditional great powers. To achieve this, relevant maritime security and development documents must be adopted and regularly reviewed and updated.

Introduction

For African states, the rise of the Indo-Pacific concept as a critical part of global policymaking and strategy is likely to be a source of political and economic opportunities and challenges. African countries rely on maritime security for effective trade with their major overseas markets. Growing geopolitical competition that may result in maritime insecurity thus prompts several serious concerns and presents new challenges to the continent.

The blockage of the Suez Canal by the MS Ever Given in March 2021 captured global attention because it highlighted the devastating consequences for our globalised economies when vital maritime supply chains, sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and maritime chokepoints are disrupted.

Indian Ocean maritime trade routes are becoming the world's most significant as most countries rely on them to reach overseas markets

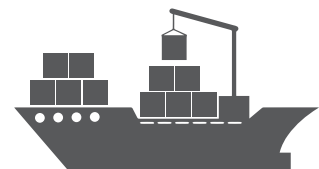
This report argues that the emergence and embrace of the concept of an Indo-Pacific region in policymaking, strategic thinking, and analysis worldwide has occurred against this backdrop. Heightened geopolitical competition will have significant implications for African states in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. This research report will explore the scope of the newly emerging geopolitical space, discuss the main actors, and then provide recommendations for African policymakers.

Geopolitics and the Indo-Pacific

The Indian Ocean region is vast, stretching from South Africa up the east coast of Africa, around the Middle East, past Pakistan and India, incorporating the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and then south past Indonesia and down to Australia, encompassing several island states of varying size.¹ It can be more broadly defined to include all states littoral to the Indian Ocean, the people who inhabit these states and several inland states that rely on neighbouring coastal states to access trading routes that crisscross the Indian Ocean.

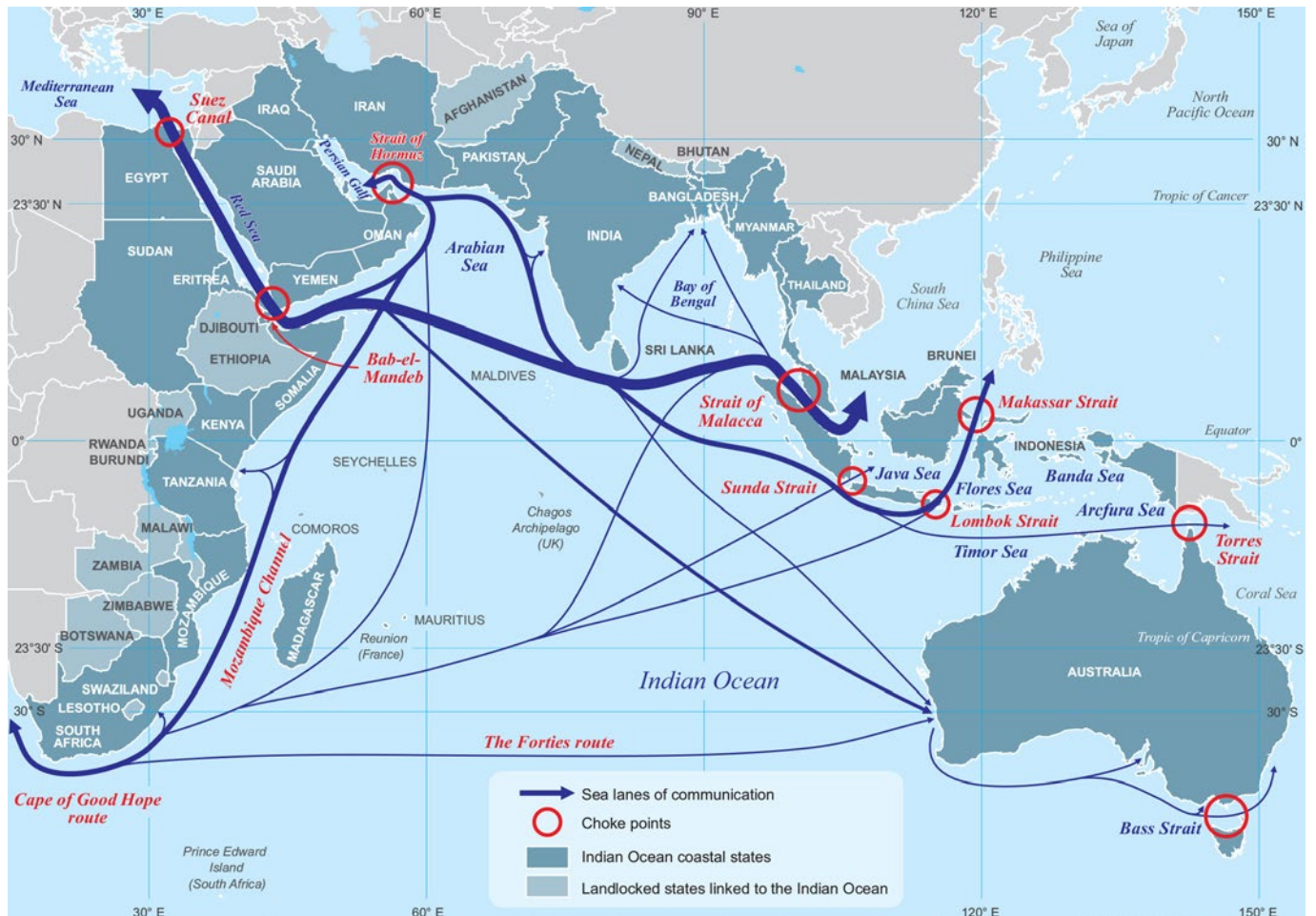
Indian Ocean maritime trade routes are becoming the world's most significant trade routes measured by volume.² Around half of the world's container traffic, a third of its cargo bulk and approximately 80% of maritime oil shipments cross the Indian Ocean.³ Additionally, nearly 40% of the offshore petroleum extracted in the world comes from the Indian Ocean.⁴

It is expected that any significant disruption of these SLOCs, mainly where they run through the choke points of the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandab/Suez Canal, would have a disastrous effect on global political and economic functions and security.⁵



80% OF MARITIME OIL SHIPMENTS, HALF OF THE WORLD'S CONTAINER TRAFFIC, AND A THIRD OF ITS BULK CARGO CROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN

Chart 1: Map of Indo-Pacific with maritime trade routes highlighted



Source: Open Edition Books

Several multilateral organisations were established in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Region Association. However, these organisations do not extend to the entire Indo-Pacific region or gather all the relevant regional actors together in one organisation.

There remains a need for international organisation and regional security architecture to address the unique and diverse challenges of the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ Such an organisation could improve cooperation and understanding and reduce tensions between significant players in the area, especially China and India.

In an increasingly complex world, intergovernmental and non-state actors and new 'virtual' spaces can

simultaneously affect and be affected by geopolitics, which can be defined as '... the struggle over hegemony in places and spaces.'⁷ Geopolitics, therefore, offers a powerful context from which to understand the actions of actors in the Indian Ocean region.

The geopolitics of the Indian Ocean region and, more broadly, of the Indo-Pacific must be understood within the context of the shifting global distribution and diffusion of power between states and from states to non-state actors and networks.⁸

Whether a new global power balance is emerging and the power configuration it will assume, be it unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar, are subjects for debate.⁹ However, the international system is fragile and vulnerable to upheaval during periods of transition if there is a distinct breakdown in multilateralism and international cooperation.

Africa and the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

The east coast of Africa marks the boundary of the Western Indian Ocean. South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt share this coastline and act as access points for their landlocked neighbours to the maritime trade routes of the Indo-Pacific. According to the African Union (AU), 90% of Africa's imports and exports travel by sea.¹⁰ Additionally, four of the six island nations in the Indian Ocean, namely Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros and Seychelles, are part of the AU. Their geographical locations in the Indian Ocean make them a vital part of the geopolitical contestation.

While Africa is blessed with significant maritime natural resources, African states have primarily neglected to develop these resources substantially and sustainably. However, there has been increased attention from policymakers and governments to the potential of the blue economy in recent years, which led to the development of the AU's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy, the AU Africa Blue Economy Strategy (2019) and other related continental and regional frameworks.

The AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) developed its Sustainable Blue Economy Programme in 2019.¹¹ Therefore, recent efforts illustrate how the blue economy is now perceived as crucial to achieving the African Union's Agenda 2063. Developed in 2013, Agenda 2063 is a strategic framework that aims to drive the inclusive, sustainable development of Africa over a 50-year timeframe.¹² However, besides corruption and poor governance, some of the most significant challenges to realising the potential of Africa's blue economy are the lack of adequate maritime infrastructure and skilled labour.

While Africa has significant maritime natural resources, the continent has neglected developing these resources substantially and sustainably

In this regard, one notable outcome of African Indian Ocean littoral states finding themselves within the boundaries of the geopolitical region was a growing dedication to meet Africa's development needs, with specific development strategies pursued by China, India and Japan. In particular, investment in maritime infrastructure is a crucial long-term geopolitical investment for countries.

China's investments in deep-water ports in the Indo-Pacific have received significant attention because of the potential of these ports to service naval ships, particularly during periods of conflict. However, this interpretation of these investments risks missing the development of significant comparative advantage for these states in international maritime trade.

While many naval ships, especially aircraft carriers, require deep waters, so do ultra-large container vessels, such as the Ever Given, or mega-ships equal to or over 18 000 20-foot equivalent units (TEU). An increasing number of these mega-ships ply the SLOCs that cross the Indo-Pacific.¹³ Of all the ports in the Indian Ocean region, only Singapore Port, Tanjung Pelepas in Malaysia, Jebel Ali in Dubai and Hambantota in Sri Lanka can accommodate them.¹⁴ India currently has no port to accommodate vessels larger than 18 000 TEU.¹⁵

11 July 2017

DJIBOUTI CAPITALISED ON
ITS PRIME GEOGRAPHIC
LOCATION BY ESTABLISHING
ITS FIRST INDIAN OCEAN BASE

The possible introduction of 24 000 TEU vessels will make deep-water commercial ports even more critical to a country's ability to trade.

As a result, countries as diverse as India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are upgrading their port infrastructure to accommodate these mega-ships.¹⁶ Control of ports with the infrastructure required to accommodate them offers a significant trade and strategic advantage.

African states have started developing their port infrastructure to accommodate larger ships and cargo volumes. The Berbera Port expansion in Somalia, the expansion of the Port of Djibouti, the development of Lamu Port in Kenya, and the upgrade of the Port of Dar es Salaam are all intended to allow these ports to increase cargo volume capacity and trade in East Africa.¹⁷ There are also plans to develop the port in Durban, South Africa, to accommodate larger ships up to 14 000 TEU.¹⁸

India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are upgrading their port infrastructure to accommodate mega-ships

However, there is some concern over what these concurrent expansions will mean in port competition on the continent. Funding the port developments in Kenya and Tanzania not only reinforces China's image as an essential development partner and enhances its political influence. It also advances its geopolitical prominence in the Indian Ocean region from a security perspective.

Being a coastal state can offer considerable advantages to African countries, particularly if they can develop the necessary infrastructure to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the blue economy. The tiny African state of Djibouti is an excellent example of this. It capitalised on its prime geographic location in the Horn of Africa with access to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea shipping lanes to host military facilities of France, the United States, Japan, Italy, Germany and Spain as well as China, which established its first Indian Ocean base there in 2017.¹⁹

Djibouti has started to develop a new mega-port, jointly financed by Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority and the China Merchant Holding Company.²⁰ In addition, Djibouti has established itself as the main commercial port for landlocked Ethiopia, handling 95% of its shipping needs. Djibouti is not the only African state that hosts foreign military bases. For example, the United States (US) also has special forces operating from forwarding operation locations in Kenya and Somalia. India also has ongoing deployments that monitor developments in the Horn of Africa and Madagascar. It plans to establish 32 radar surveillance stations, with sites in the Seychelles and Mauritius.²¹

Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey appear to be building their economic and diplomatic ties with the islands of the Indian Ocean.²² Turkey opened a military base in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 2017. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), on the

95%

OF ETHIOPIA'S COMMERCIAL
CARGO IS HANDLED AT
DJIBOUTI'S NEW MEGA-PORT

other hand, has had a military base in Eritrea since 2015, which includes a deep-water naval port. It has been used in operations against opposition forces in Yemen.²³

Russia is also acting to secure a presence in the Indian Ocean and in 2020 announced the establishment of a naval base in Sudan for 25 years.²⁴ This base allows Russia strategic access to the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb choke point.

The presence of foreign military bases may improve the security of a state's territorial waters and access to SLOCs in the short term, but the more significant the presence of foreign states in the Western Indian Ocean, the greater the opportunity for friction and conflict between these states.

The significant presence of foreign states in the Western Indian Ocean creates opportunity for friction between states

This is especially true if these states belong to different alliances, such as those forming around the US and India on the one hand and China and its allies on the other. The potential for friction is even more remarkable when both sides are represented in one state, and it is unclear under which sphere of influence that state falls.

While it is tempting to argue that African states littoral to the Indian Ocean can remain neutral, it seems unlikely that this would persist in the long run as alliances begin to harden and formalise. African states may find themselves the subject of proxy wars similar to those fought during the Cold War, which would be extremely harmful to these states' long-term peace, stability and development. Despite the growing presence of foreign states in the western Indian Ocean, geopolitical posturing is still only a tiny element of the maritime threats African states face in the short to medium term.²⁵

In the short term, the most significant security threats to African states in their territorial waters are non-state actors and non-traditional threats such as piracy, illegal fishing, natural disasters, drug smuggling and human trafficking.²⁶ These threats are likely to be exacerbated by climate change. It is also true that what happens at sea affects the land and vice versa. This is demonstrated by the current situation in Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique, where an incipient Islamist insurgency threatens maritime security and offshore energy developments.²⁷

The response of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to the ongoing crisis in Cabo Delgado highlights some of the significant difficulties of states responding to land and maritime threats. SADC's slow reaction shows its members' minimal capabilities and political will to pursue collective security institutions, even from neighbouring South Africa – arguably the strongest naval power in the region. This increases the likelihood of extra-regional involvement, both private security/military companies and foreign powers.²⁸ It poses a threat to the sovereignty of African states and the plans and ambitions of its regional economic communities and the AU.

It is in African states' best interests to develop enough military power, especially naval, to defend themselves from traditional and non-traditional security threats in their territorial waters and exclusive economic zones and enforce their sovereignty. In the absence of sufficient economic and political power to develop individual armed forces or even a coast guard, perhaps establishing a regional approach would be advisable.

African states need a clear conception of their national interests and to leverage these power competitions to achieve their aims strategically. To augment the power of individual states, the regional economic communities and the AU need to develop a clear conception of their members' mutual and competing interests and develop strategies to achieve these, with and without great/global powers' support.

It is in the best interest of African states to formulate joint negotiating positions and leverage existing multilateral organisations to achieve their aims. African states must be careful when choosing to ally with these great/global powers or risk being drawn into arrangements that do not benefit them. African states could also find themselves in conflict, fighting proxy wars, should they ally with different powers.

African states need to scale up their potential power (military including cyber warfare, economic, political, cultural and soft) despite the constrained resources at their disposal. In this regard, African states must act together to improve their maritime infrastructure, which can handle the mega-ships of today and the future while avoiding unnecessary and unhelpful competition.

Traditional great powers – still there

Given the centrality of the Indo-Pacific region for the world's economy, trade and security, global powers have been steadily increasing their presence and interest in this space. The most powerful states involved in geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific can be broken down into traditional great powers and the emerging global powers.

The traditional powers have maintained a presence in the region due to their historical legacy. During the colonial period, European powers contested for control and domination of the Indian Ocean region and its natural resources until Britain established hegemony in the area, largely thanks to its naval supremacy and financial strength.²⁹

Britain maintains historical ties with its former colonies and members of the Commonwealth in the region. It maintains an active presence in the area, although the actual effects of Brexit on its ability to continue its presence in the long run remains a paramount concern. The UK has notably sent a full-strength carrier strike force to the Indo-Pacific and stopped in India, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.³⁰ France remains a significant provider of security and an important actor, particularly in the Western Indian Ocean, and the island of Reunion remains French territory.³¹

Africa should not allow the Indian Ocean region to become the venue for a new international 'Great Game' as geopolitical competition intensifies

During the Cold War era, the US became the dominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean. The US continues to maintain its military base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago, which it leases from the UK. However, the sovereignty of the island, which is currently considered an overseas territory of the UK, is disputed by Mauritius, whose position was supported by a UN General Assembly Resolution in 2019.³²

The US position on the Indian Ocean began to shift during the Obama administration (2009–2017) away from its focus on the Atlantic, Europe and the Middle East towards Asia-Pacific, which was defined to include India and the Eastern Indian Ocean. This strategy was rebranded as the Indo-Pacific Strategy during the Trump administration (2017–2021), which included changing the name of the US Pacific Command to the US Indo-Pacific Command.³³

The current Biden administration has placed the Indo-Pacific at the forefront of its diplomatic efforts. This has been illustrated by the decision to send the secretaries of state and defence to Asia for their first international visits and Biden making his first international commitment the Quad Summit, with the leaders of Japan, Australia and India.³⁴ The Quad is a loose alliance of the four nations.

April 2019

THE EU INCREASED SECURITY
IN THE INDO-PACIFIC TO PROTECT
ITS INTERESTS AGAINST
CHINA'S RISING POWER

Interestingly, the European Union (EU) resolved in April 2019 to increase its influence in the Indo-Pacific region to protect its interests and counter China's rising power, while insisting that its strategy is not anti-China but rather against the spread of authoritarianism.³⁵ However, the statement's language could signal support for the US and EU trading partners in Asia to ensure maritime security and enhance trade in the Indo-Pacific.

Emerging global powers: China and India

China and India are most often described as 'emerging global powers', a term used to distinguish states that can be characterised as great power states but are from the developing world.³⁶ China and India have increasingly global outlooks based on their respective national interests.

Both countries have been growing and developing their militaries as many of these interests lie abroad and lack the necessary global power projection capabilities to defend them. Both China and India need economic growth to lift their populations out of poverty, improve their living standards, and minimise the chance of social unrest. This has resulted in a security dilemma. China perceives the US and India as potential threats to its access to the Indian and Pacific oceans. Therefore, it engages in complex balancing to prevent either one from hindering its access to energy, trade and the SLOCs. It is also looking to develop its sphere of influence, especially in the Western Pacific.³⁷

India considers the Indian Ocean to be its sphere of influence and is concerned with the intrusion of China into that region

China remains relatively isolated in its East Asian region, given the contentious nature of its relationships with most ASEAN countries. However, it has built some crucial relationships with states in the Indian Ocean region, such as Pakistan.³⁸ The importance of this relationship is highlighted by the Chinese investment in the port of Gwadar and the CPEC initiative, a flagship project of the One Belt, One Road initiative and China's Maritime Silk Route.³⁹

India considers the Indian Ocean to be its sphere of influence and is increasingly concerned about the intrusion of China into the Indian Ocean region. India has

long feared China's aggression at its land border, and 2020 saw several skirmishes occur, with one skirmish in January 2021 resulting in troops being injured on both sides.⁴⁰ China also has a growing relationship with India's historical rival, Pakistan.

India is therefore looking to work closely with the US as the current superpower, as New Delhi perceives China and its allies to be the biggest threat to its regional interests and the biggest impediment to its rise as a global power. This cooperation is illustrated by the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, which created a mutual platform between India and the US to use each other's military bases and other facilities.⁴¹ The relationship has further been strengthened by joint military exercises and membership in the Quad.⁴²

Despite the emerging competition in the Indo-Pacific region, all actors have responded to the threat posed to SLOCs by piracy in the Gulf of Aden. They were all also involved in other multilateral disaster relief efforts, anti-drug smuggling operations and search and rescue.⁴³ This shows that even rival sea powers will cooperate in dealing with non-state threats to the international maritime domain, which is a positive sign. It seems likely that these threats will continue to proliferate given climate change and regional instability, particularly in the Western Indian Ocean, and will play an even more significant role in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean.⁴⁴

Conclusion

African states cannot afford the Indian Ocean region to become the venue for a new, international 'Great Game'. The effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are causing many states to reconsider the self-sufficiency and security of their supply chains with overseas markets and partners.

The geopolitical perspective advanced in this report suggests that competition is intensifying. Several countries could move to secure their energy and trade supply chains more assertively, using their militaries (especially navies) as primary instruments of their foreign policies regarding the Indo-Pacific. The resultant crisis or dilemma could increase the insecurity of the maritime trading system upon which Africa depends and the necessity of ensuring the security of SLOCs running adjacent to Africa.

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