

Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region

Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan
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Hamna Ghias Sheikh^{*}

The book *Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* by Frédéric Grare and Jean-Loup Samaan offers a comprehensive analysis of the Indian Ocean's transformation into a pivotal geopolitical and security arena. Grare, a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and a non-resident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, along with Samaan, a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore and Associate Researcher with the French Institute of International Relations, bring their extensive expertise to this study.

This comprehensive work moves beyond the historical role of the Indian Ocean as a maritime trade route to examine its emerging status as a strategic hub. The central theme of the *Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* is the transformation of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) into a pivotal geopolitical and security arena. The book explores the evolving strategic dynamics in the region, driven by the intersecting interests of major global powers, emerging regional actors, and shifting economic and security landscapes. It emphasizes the growing competition for influence among global and regional powers like the United States, China, and India, while also examining the roles of European states, Gulf Arab monarchies, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Australia, and Africa.

In the first and *Introductory* Chapter, the authors analyze key geopolitical shifts, security challenges, and the intersecting strategic interests of the US,

^{*} Reviewed by Hamna Ghias Sheikh, Research Associate at Pakistan Navy War College (PNWC), Lahore

China, and India alongside the influence of regional organizations. They critically evaluate the policies and initiatives of these stakeholders, addressing their implications for regional stability and global maritime governance. With contributions from leading scholars and practitioners, this book provides a nuanced understanding of the evolving political and security dynamics of the Indian Ocean. It serves as a timely resource for policymakers, academics, and professionals seeking insights into the region's significance in twenty-first-century geopolitics.

Chapter two, *The Advent of China's Indian Ocean Strategy*, provides a comprehensive analysis of China's strategic initiatives and its growing role in the IOR. The chapter traces China's historical ties to the Indian Ocean, rooted in ancient maritime trade routes, and examines their contemporary revival through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Key strategic investments and infrastructure projects along the Indian Ocean littoral, including the development of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, are analyzed within the broader framework of China's Maritime Silk Road strategy, highlighting their geopolitical significance and security implications.

The chapter also underscores China's early recognition of the geopolitical importance of the IOR, illustrated by its inaugural port visits to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in 1985–1986. These visits marked a significant milestone in Chinese naval capabilities and strategic outreach in the region. However, subsequent port calls were delayed until the mid-1990s, by which time China had become a net importer of oil. This shift emphasized the economic imperatives behind its naval activities in the IOR, particularly the need to secure maritime trade routes for energy resources. The authors also highlight China's efforts to secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) through naval diplomacy and partnerships, responses from other powers such as the US and India, and the economic impacts of China's investments. The chapter underlines concern over debt sustainability in recipient countries and internal debates within China about military strategies for ensuring energy security in the Indian Ocean.

Chapter Three, *Between East and West: India's Revived Engagements*, provides a nuanced analysis of the evolving geopolitical dynamics between China and India in the IOR over the past two decades, particularly in the

context of the BRI. It emphasizes the central role of India in the region, driven by its economic growth and increasing need for energy supplies and raw materials, paralleling the strategic priorities of China. In response to China's growing influence, India has strengthened its relationships with states in the Persian Gulf and Africa while forming partnerships with key regional powers such as Japan, France, and the US. The authors also discuss India's efforts to enhance its regional influence through initiatives like trilateral frameworks involving small island states in the Indian Ocean. In collaboration with Japan, India has pursued infrastructure development projects aimed at countering China's growing influence in East Africa, Eastern countries, and Southeast Asia. These strategic moves have prompted India to redefine its policy in the Indian Ocean, adopt a more prominent regional role, and cautiously expand defense partnerships with various regional actors.

In chapter four, titled *The US, the Reluctant Offshore Balancer of the Indian Ocean Rivalries*, the authors examine the evolving role of the US in the IOR. Historically, the US has treated the region as a secondary priority, which has allowed China to expand its influence. Despite this, the authors emphasize that the US remains a key player due to its significant military presence, with its regional interests largely driven by economic competition with China. The chapter contextualizes the Indian Ocean within the framework of great power rivalry between China and India while highlighting the limited US engagement with other regional players, such as South Africa and the Arabian Gulf countries. This limited engagement is exemplified by recent developments, including the strengthening of relations between the Arab Gulf states, Iran, and China, which reflect shifting dynamics in the region. Moreover, the authors argue that these changes underscore the need for the US to reassess its approach to the IOR if it aims to maintain its influence amid growing competition.

Chapter Five, *The UK and France: A European Struggle for Regional Influence*, discusses how France and the UK are reasserting their presence in the IOR through strategic partnerships in Africa and ASEAN. Historically perceived as a competitive arena for European powers, the region's dynamics are now influenced by global financial constraints. The authors argue that Europe should adapt its economic policies, particularly in Africa, to effectively compete with emerging powers such as China.

Furthermore, Chapter Six, *The Gulf Arab Monarchies: From Gateways to Strategic Players in the Indian Ocean?* analyzes the transformation of Gulf Arab monarchies—such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—from being mere gatekeepers to becoming active strategic players in the region. Their increased investments and military engagements have enhanced their influence but have also introduced complexities, as demonstrated by tensions like those between UAE and Qatar in the Horn of Africa.

The subsequent chapter titled *Australia and the ASEAN Member States: From Interest to Commitment?* examines the evolving roles of Australia and ASEAN as they shift from passive observers to active participants in Indian Ocean affairs. The chapter highlights Australia's strategic adjustments in response to China's growing influence and explores the internal challenges faced by ASEAN in formulating a unified stance on regional issues, given its diverse member states and competing priorities. Furthermore, in the second last chapter titled *Indian Ocean Africa: From Mere Stakeholder to Future Power Broker?* Grare and Samaan focus on Africa's transformation from a passive stakeholder to a potential power broker in the IOR. The chapter underscores Africa's increasing integration into global initiatives, such as China's BRI, signaling a departure from historical colonial dependencies. The authors emphasize Africa's strategic efforts, particularly by East African states, to attract regional powers by leveraging their abundant natural resources.

The last chapter *Rethinking the Indian Ocean Security Architecture*, reevaluates the security framework of the IOR, advocating for a governance-oriented approach rather than one driven by competitive dynamics. The authors stress the importance of strengthening multilateral frameworks to mitigate potential conflicts and enhance regional stability. They propose pragmatic strategies to strengthen existing regional organizations while pursuing new cooperative frameworks among states and institutions. This collaborative approach aims to prevent the IOR from becoming a battleground for global powers. Instead, the authors emphasize the need for joint efforts to manage and govern the region's complex geopolitical landscape, promoting sustainable and inclusive security solutions.

While the book provides a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the evolving dynamics in the IOR, its predominantly Western perspective may inadvertently narrow the scope of its analysis. The emphasis on the strategic interests and policies of Western powers, particularly those of the US and European countries, often overshadows the perspectives and initiatives of regional actors. Although China's growing influence and strategic activities are well-documented, the analysis frequently frames them through Western strategic lenses, potentially underemphasizing China's developmental role in the region.

Similarly, the examination of regional powers like India and the Gulf Arab monarchies often centers on their interactions with Western states and their competition with China, rather than fully exploring their independent regional strategies and roles. This focus may limit a deeper understanding of the autonomous contributions of these actors to the evolving geopolitical and security landscape of the IOR.