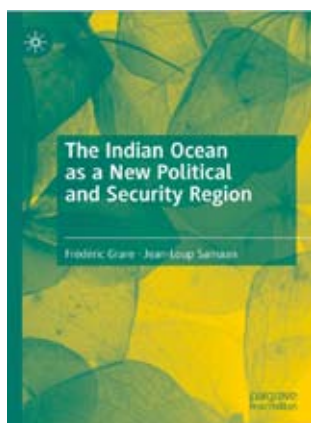


Book Review

The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region.
Frederic Grare & Jean-Loup Samaan.
Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2022. 277 pages

Reviewed by *Saaz Lahiri*



In their co-authored book, *“The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region”*, Dr Frederic Grare and Dr Jean-Loup Samaan have illustrated unique geographical perspectives on the security dynamics of the Indian Ocean. Spanning nine chapters, the book addresses a variety of concepts and actors influencing the dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) — from India’s rapprochement with small islands States in the IOR to the increased focus on eastern Africa due to the latter’s abundance of natural resources. The book emphasises that geographical proximity does not equate to political proximity and highlights the common denominator amongst all the relevant players within and outside the IOR, namely, China’s growing naval

presence in the region and her “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The book also analyses the great power competition within the IOR as a consequence of power asymmetries and evolving national narratives. The authors draw heavily from official documents released or “leaked” (as claimed by the authors) by governments, selected reliable media sources, participant observations, and articles by reputed think tanks.

The authors suggest that the politics of the IOR are primarily determined by the agendas of India, China, and the United States (US). However, they emphasise the significance of small island nations in the neighbourhood, as well as external stakeholders such as the European Union (EU), Persian Gulf monarchies, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), amongst others. These stakeholders have nurtured their respective ambitions and attempted to strengthen bilateral ties with local powers through active participation in regional institutions operating in the IOR.

In the second chapter, entitled, *“The Advent of China’s Indian Ocean Strategy”*, Grare and Samaan assert that counter-piracy has served as China’s alibi to justify its presence in and off distant shores and to train its blue-water navy. They explain that in 2008, China was invited by Western powers to participate in anti-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. Subsequently, in 2017, China built port infrastructure in Djibouti even though piracy had ceased to be a significant threat. The authors conclude that China’s coercive diplomacy, soft power influence, strategic partnerships with Russia, Pakistan and Iran, and its dependency on the high seas have laid the foundations for cooperation within the realm of maritime security in the IOR.

In the third chapter, entitled, “*Between East and West, India’s Revived Engagements*”, the authors postulate that India’s policy of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) addresses its previous neglect of neighbouring countries in its foreign policy. The success of SAGAR, they argue, depends on India’s ability to mobilise the economic, military, and political capacities of its regional partners. Consequently, India’s efforts are now refocused on the Indian Ocean to the east and west of the country. SAGAR allows India to protect its mainland and islands, strengthen relations with maritime neighbours, encourage collective action for security and harmony, and promote sustainable development through integration and cooperation. The authors also state that the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has failed to overcome economic development asymmetries and has not been able to match Chinese resources to drive regional economic integration. They further argue that the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) has produced mixed results. Therefore, there is a need for Indian Ocean regionalism to enhance maritime safety and security, disaster risk management, science, technology and academic cooperation, tourism and cultural exchanges, fisheries management, and trade and investment facilitation.

In the fourth chapter, “*The US, the Reluctant Offshore Balancer of the Indian Ocean Rivalries*”, the authors opine that the United States is reluctant to undertake “*offshore balancing*”. They contend that the US approach combines two distinct policies: viewing the region as a theatre of conflict with China, and considering it as an aggregation of weak States. Despite the “*Pivot to Asia*” being a central foreign policy initiative of the Obama administration, the IOR was significantly underemphasised. Subsequently, President Trump revived the region’s importance with the “*Asia Reassurance Initiative Act*” (ARIA). However, the US-India alliance against China is a complex one and the authors believe that the US has misjudged the asymmetries between India and China and has also overlooked the complexities in India-US ties.

In the fifth chapter, entitled, “*The UK and France: The European Struggle for Regional Influence*”, Grare and Samaan dwell upon the relevance of France and the UK in the IOR. They underscore the fact that both countries are employing hard and soft power strategies to maintain their presence in the region. However, the authors argue that the policies of these countries will have limited impact on regional dynamics unless supported by other Western and local partners, although they may well influence regional arrangements such as the “*Five Power Defence Arrangement*” (FPDA) and the AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US trilateral partnership) pact. Additionally, with Brexit, France has arguably assumed the responsibility for maritime security as the *de facto* “*most active*” EU nation in the IOR. However, if US-China relations sour, the UK would invariably be involved, due to the strategic importance of the Diego Garcia facilities.

In the sixth chapter, entitled, “*The Gulf Arab Monarchies: From Gateways to Strategic Players in the Indian Ocean?*”, the authors scrutinise the evolving relationships between the countries comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other major stakeholders of the IOR. They also delve into the GCC’s ability to influence the regional balance of power. China, India, Japan, and South Korea are the biggest importers of crude oil from the Gulf, with 35 per cent of the total passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are engaging with Southeast Asian nations on the

subject of counterterrorism. However, the authors also stress that a lack of convergence within the GCC will lead to unilateral initiatives by Arab monarchies. The absence of intra-Gulf support for multilateral institutions will result in a hedging strategy to prevent the domination of regional dynamics by the US-China-India triangle in the IOR.

The authors emphasise the significance of Australia and the ASEAN construct in the Indo-Pacific region in chapter seven, entitled, “*Australia and the ASEAN Member States: From Interest to Commitment?*”. They argue that Australia has radically altered its perception of China and has developed strategic partnerships with the US, France, and India in response to Beijing’s “*revision of her regional posture*”. However, they point out that ASEAN’s role in the IOR security architecture is largely limited due to the bilateral relationships of its constituent States with China. Grare and Samaan also underscore the relevance of the Quad in strengthening relations between the US and India, highlighting the importance of US engagements with ASEAN countries. These engagements include defence treaty alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, counter-terrorism cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia, and military educational programmes with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Interestingly, the authors point out that similarities in the visions and actions of several sub-regional organisations within the IOR lead to competition rather than cooperation. For example, they examine the South African Development Community (SADC), IORA, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and ASEAN. These organisations share some similar objectives in the Indian Ocean but rarely interact with one another.

In chapter eight, entitled “*Indian Ocean Africa: From Mere Stakeholder to Future Power Broker?*”, the authors suggest that the dependency of eastern African states upon external powers for their maritime security is another challenge that the IOR’s security structure needs to address. The severe limitations of the largely constabulary navies of Kenya, Eritrea, Mauritius, Tanzania, Comoros, Madagascar, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Djibouti, have drawn the attention of the US, the EU, China, and India. This has prompted these powers to mobilise substantial naval resources of their own to ensure the security of International Shipping Lanes in the region. Djibouti, in particular, has assumed strategic importance in the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

The main argument of the book is that the future of the Indian Ocean lies in the ability of regional players to collaborate in creating a regional order that redefines their relations with external powers, moving away from the colonial narrative. However, it is evident that security and stability in the IOR cannot be achieved by strengthening or constructing a single regional organisation due to power asymmetries. Therefore, the arguments put forth by the authors lead to the following questions: (a) Is the US still a global hegemon, and is China attempting to become a regional hegemon? (b) Do minilaterals draw attention away from multilateral institutions? (c) Should the IOR be perceived as a political construct or merely a geographical framework? (d) Will regional security complexes help bolster regional security architecture?; and (e) Can eastern African and Gulf countries become regional maritime players?

Unfortunately, the authors do not appear to have appreciated that bilateral relations form the backbone of minilateral initiatives (including within the Quad), as minilateralism

relies on specific alignments and the convergence of interests amongst three or more nations. The book would have provided a more comprehensive read had it included German, Italian, and Spanish perspectives, which would then have lent more weight to the EU argument, given the EU's interest in eastern Africa and the IOR. Furthermore, the authors seem to have overlooked the fact that granting observer status in the IONS to countries geographically outside the IOR requires consensus amongst all members.

In conclusion, the authors correctly assert that the proliferation of new players in the region should not lead to power competition. Instead, stakeholders should strengthen existing multilateral mechanisms of governance within the IOR and should opt for a flexible, pragmatic approach to encourage cooperation within established regional organisations. Any new cooperation frameworks — whether they be bilateral, trilateral, or quadrilateral — should be created only if absolutely essential. This reviewer concurs with the argument that addressing the “*China Challenge*” does not necessitate a confrontational approach but rather collective action, leveraging both resident and non-resident powers' economic and military capacities and capabilities. However, while the authors have integrated various extra-regional perspectives into the dynamics of the IOR, this reviewer finds the arguments regarding the probable influence of specific stakeholders insufficiently convincing.

Note on Reviewer

Ms Saaz Lahiri is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF). She holds a Bachelor's degree in 'History and International Relations', and a Post Graduate Diploma in 'International Relations' from Ashoka University. Her research focuses upon the manner in which India's maritime strategies interface and interact with those of the European Union (EU). She can be reached at eu4.nmf@gmail.com