

Book Reviews

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In this section, the Ocean Regions Team in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria offers short reviews of four books covering aspects related to ocean politics.

The Sea and International Relations,

edited by Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira

(Manchester University Press 2022).

Books on the international politics of oceans are few and far between: in fact, a mere eight years ago, scholars like Bueger and Edwards (2017:1293) complained about “seablindness” and Colás, one of the contributors to the present volume comments that since the inception of International Relations as an academic discipline, only a handful of scholars have addressed the ‘place of the sea’ in international relations. The editors of this volume set out to correct this lacuna in the discipline, acknowledging that it was geographers like Steinberg and Peters who have brought the importance of the sea (after all, 70 per cent of earth’s surface is covered by water) to the attention of international relations scholars.

Contributors to this volume, in the words of the editors, ‘are not writing the International Relations (IR) *of the Sea* but give perspectives on how the sea matters *to* International Relations’, by exploring oceans and ocean politics through the tropes of ‘taming or mastering the sea’, ‘traversing the waters’ and ‘controlling maritime resources’. Following the introduction which provides a deep reflection on why ‘the sea matters’ in international relations, Colás’ chapter introduces the concept of terraqueous relations and linkages between sea and land, setting the scene for the remaining eight chapters dealing with such aspects as the extent to which the sea is intertwined in the construction of collective identities (Mälksoo) and of gender and race (Leira and De Carvalho); the former reminiscent of the writings of Kenyan author Yvonne Owuor and the latter specifically addressing how ‘sea writing’ has largely privileged white and male perspectives. Shirk’s chapter on the early modern colonial Atlantic (*Boundaries in the sea*) in a way follows on Leira and De Carvalho’s chapter, however, the focus is more specifically on the making of political space/the production of political space at sea and much more than simplistic perspectives of the sea as merely something to be crossed to get from one land mass to another. The chapter also provides context to the seaborne empires of the age of imperialism and how these differed from land-based empires: the former, Shirk says, were built on ‘networks of commerce and exchange’; the latter on military might. The focus of the chapter, though, remains on the history of the concept of ‘open seas’, a concept brought into sharp relief by former Japanese Prime Minister Abe’s 2016 insistence on a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP).

Of particular interest and importance is Braarud’s chapter on obligations *erga omnes* in relation to the concept of the common heritage of mankind under the Law of the Sea Convention, at present one of the most contentious issues in international law. The legal principle of *ubi jus ibi remedium*—every right necessitates a remedy—is at stake here: If the high seas (the Area as it is phrased in UNCLOS) ‘belongs’ to all of humankind, should humankind (i.e. states, as these have primacy in public international law) also be responsible for, or, more positively phrased, have the right “to take legal action against unlawful appropriation or harm” (p201)?

Running as a golden thread throughout the volume, is the way in and extent to which ‘landed politics embedded within maps and navigational tools’ are ‘taken to sea’ in efforts to ‘tame the sea within our innately landed IR imaginations’ (see Simonds’ chapter), thereby often creating insecure spaces, and policies and approaches that do not necessarily transfer easily or efficiently to oceans and oceans governance. Nevertheless, at a theoretical level the book is rather thin on engaging with the challenge of thinking ‘terraqueously’. The editors suggest a materialist approach to theorising IR ‘at sea’ as materialist theories assume that the material—the ‘real’—ocean structures human interaction with the sea. Although such an approach does not infuse all the contributions explicitly, it does offer at the very least the basis of a research agenda.

If one had to explain the rise of ocean politics within the discipline of International Relations, three interrelated aspects and trends in our contemporary era stand out: Firstly, the growing battle for influence and power projection over and access to ocean spaces as part of the return of geopolitical contestation—here the rise of China stands at the centre. Anyone following maritime and naval news knows how much attention is increasingly paid to (re-) building naval forces and the projection of naval power. Secondly, technological innovation going hand in hand with the rise of the so-called blue economy—the scramble for resources at sea that drives so much of the competition

for ocean predominance. Technology here is like a double-edged sword: it both makes exploration and extraction in previously inhospitable areas (the high seas) possible and it also requires access to certain resources (mainly energy and critical minerals) to be found in the ocean. Thirdly, the role of climate change as a driver for ‘ocean attention’ cannot be denied and it is especially in the sphere of international law of the sea and debates about and attempts to legislate through treaty development that we see a growing interest in the politics of the sea. This book, rather heavily Anglocentric in its approach (although conscious of this bias, as is shown in the concluding chapter by Guillaume and Costa López), does touch on these three aspects, opening up areas for further research, especially from a global South perspective.

Ocean Governance (Beyond) Borders

edited by Kimberley Peters and Jennifer Turner

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, Open Access)

This volume focuses on borders/bordering of ocean spaces, utilising multidisciplinary perspectives to examine and critique oceanic bordering practices. Drawing lines and dividing parcels of space/s by means of such lines are ways through which governance practices and frameworks are created, in this case in terms of 70 per cent of the world’s surface area: the oceans. In the words of the editors (p4), “borders ... in the ocean, work to locate and allocate spaces for specific uses for specific people (and not others), through a spatial politics of enclosure”, and in the 12 chapters of this volume, the authors explore these spatial politics of (oceanic) enclosure. They also, implicitly or explicitly, ask the question whether it is possible to think *beyond* borders as a mode of oceanic management, reminding this reader of the work of Elisabeth Mann Borgese (1998), *Oceanic Circle*, who grappled with the idea of the oceans as a borderless world and how managing such a world could provide possibilities for different *terrestrial* ways of governance.

In his chapter on governing the ocean in ‘time, matter and rhythm’, McAteer builds an argument that to better theorise the ocean, it is necessary to also take temporality and materiality, and not only space, into consideration. For McAteer, it is about process and complexity rather than borders and containers. This leads to a critique of the 2023 BBNJ Treaty before the author considers the ontological questions surrounding the dimensions of ocean space, using the JEROS programme as an example of an experimental relational approach to ocean governance. McAteer’s chapter works within a kind of anthropogenic consciousness, as does several of the other chapters that deal with what one can term a growing interest in what ‘the sea’ has to offer in terms of resources-for-profit. Couling’s chapter is a good example and provides much food for thought around attempts to contain ocean space through exclusive economic zones (EEZs)—what the author refers to as a form of a “radical new state space” (p46). This is a fascinating exploration of the meaning/s of borders and bordering and ‘layers of borders’—a must-read for students of border studies and oceans governance processes. Couling uses these different types of border-making to provide a type of counter-mapping of the Norwegian Sea—an exercise that could be replicated around Africa’s seas to, as it were, open one’s eyes to the actual properties and dimensions of ‘our’ oceans and inform our studies of ocean governance.

Issues around exploitation versus protection/conservation and the way in which bordering practices play into these often contradictory impulses are explored and reflected upon by using the case of fisheries in the chapter by Po-Yi Hung. Other chapters dealing with the exploitation/extraction-protection/conservation dichotomy are those that address issues around marine protected areas (MPAs) and here Kunz’s chapter is particularly interesting. It specifically questions the extent to which MPAs as an area-based global policy to protect marine eco-systems can and do actually support the problems inherent to climate change. The author concludes that MPA governance “itself has to adapt” (p149; emphasis in the original), moving beyond material borders as “simple matters of fact” (p152). Throughout most of these chapters the idea of power, and the question of ‘cui bono?’ are brought into the equation, showing the extent to which ocean border-making is in essence, a (geo)political act.

Overall, this volume opens up questions of how (ocean) borders work. The authors reflect on alternatives, but, as conceded by the editors in the concluding chapter, ‘borders are here to stay’ (p272). This is not a fatalistic acceptance—rather, it leaves us with a research agenda into both (ocean) border-making, chartering the consequences, and thinking through ways of addressing the challenges. It might not be possible to move *beyond* borders, but there is knowledge and insight to be gained from studying borders and developing responses to the implications of drawing lines in the water.

The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific

by Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley

(Oxford University Press 2019)

Although perhaps somewhat dated, Doyle and Rumley's monograph succeeds in putting the construct, Indo-Pacific, at the centre of ocean and maritime studies in the region that, one could argue, 'logically' succeeded Asia Pacific as a new geopolitical and geo-economic focus point. By discussing this mega ocean region in the context of three theoretical frameworks—a non-realist interpretation that posits a 'shared oceanic neighbourhood'; a realist construction that establishes essentialist relationships between the states in the region and, thirdly, a universalist interpretation of ocean space that "resists territorialization" (p1), the authors present a holistic picture of the Indo-Pacific as both a geographically-determined space overlaid and infused by contemporary geopolitical contestation, and a social construct dating back many centuries. This latter aspect, though—the Indo-Pacific as (also) a *place* of communities, cultures and civilisations—does not receive much attention, except to the extent that the authors explain how *narratives* about (shared) culture and the evolution of community in this vast ocean space especially those embedded in history (and legend!) underlie much of the justification of state interest in this region. In summary, this is a book about the politics of region-building, power projection and competing ideologies in which shared history/histories serve the political ambitions and interests of particular states.

Three topics covered in this book are of particular interest and importance. The first is the discussion of maritime regional theories (the last section of Chapter one and also Chapter two, but serving as a thread throughout the book) and the construction of 'Indo-Pacific' as measured against eight regionalisation principles (p9)—a discussion that brings one to the Indo-Pacific as an example of oceanic regionalism, yet still considered, at least by the US, as 'the dominant international waterway of the 21st century', much as the Mediterranean in the ancient world and the Atlantic during the 20th century (p10). This is an observation by the authors that inadvertently implies a rather western focus: one cannot but wonder about centuries, if not millennia, during and following in the wake of Mediterranean 'regionalisation' when the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were as prominent in international trade and interaction. Chapter three to some extent, continues the region/regionalism/regionalisation argument, now focused very specifically on how the revival of certain paradigms and concepts shape the 'national lenses' through which great and middle powers in and around the Indo-Pacific attempt to build their visions of this region-in-the-making.

A second topic is that of the continued relevance of Cold War strategic thinking/logic for the present day politics of the Indo-Pacific (Chapter four). This chapter goes a long way in explaining continued (and re-emerging) tensions and conflict in the region and forms the context for the following topic dealt with in detail in Chapters five to eight, namely the role and position of how a number of great powers (the USA, India and China) and the middle powers of the Indo-Pacific construct this region, define their interests and perceive and interact with other powers, whether 'big', 'middle' or 'small'.

The third topic concerns the idea of institution building in the Indo-Pacific. This is an aspect that receives rather scant attention and only so in the concluding chapter, sharing space, so to speak, with the authors' reiteration of a number of key issues discussed in earlier chapters, most prominent of which is the importance they attach to the continued salience of Chinese-US relations. It is this relationship, they conclude, "which will largely determine the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region in the twenty first century and beyond" (p162). The authors then proceed to offer some thoughts on a regional architecture for the Indo-Pacific, arguing that the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) offers the most viable instrument for "implementing a shared vision of the region" (p167). This section sits rather uneasily in a book that is largely focused on the strategic interests and supporting political-ideological manoeuvrings of big powers (and middle powers), yet it does bring an element of non-realist and even liberal understanding the region as a 'neighbourhood' that could be drawn together by a shared vision of building a sustainable future.

For anyone wanting to understand the 'rise and return' of the Indo-Pacific, Doyle and Rumley's monograph is essential. They wrote the book during the era of the first Trump administration. Given the rise and return of Trump, the book remains relevant.

Cross Currents: The New Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean,

edited by David Brewster, Samuel Bashfield and Justin Burke

(ANU: National Security College Press, 2025)

Brewster et al.'s edited volume brings together perspective from across the Indian Ocean region to reflect on the future of the region as part of the Indo-Pacific construct. As the editors say in their introduction, the Indian Ocean is becoming a 'much more complex, congested and contested strategic space'.

The book is structured around three focus areas: firstly, the changing balance of power amongst the major powers in the region (the US, India and China); secondly, the greater presence of the region's 'resident' middle powers—Australia, France and South Africa—as well as Indonesia as an emerging regional middle power, and thirdly, the ways in which smaller island states, such as Sri Lanka and some of the Indian Ocean island states are forging their own agency whilst mitigating the adverse impact of major power contestation. The attention to the region's island states (three chapters are devoted to these states) is especially welcome, as small island states are often ignored in the literature, even though their influence has been steadily rising. The involvement of extra-regional powers such as Japan, the United Kingdom and Russia is also considered. It was, after all, Japan's Abe who (re)introduced the Indo-Pacific concept to the world stage in 2007; the UK has retained a presence in the region despite recently handing sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius (it retains control over Diego Garcia) and Russia is pursuing closer relations with Pakistan and seeking to establish a naval base, most probably in Port Sudan.

In addressing major power competition, the book dedicates at least three chapters to a consideration of air and space power in addition to naval strategy and power, and the 'naval balance', as well as a chapter on the significance of the littoral seam in terms of the importance of amphibious capabilities in the region. The argument put forward in the introductory chapter, namely that in the Indian Ocean the great power competition will play out largely between India and China, is convincing (as opposed to between China and the USA in the Pacific), resonating in several chapters.

In the concluding chapter Brewster and Medcalf draw together the various strands in this volume and interrogate the strategic future of the Indian Ocean as part of the Indo-Pacific. Based on insights from the contributors to the volume, one is not surprised that the authors emphasise that despite the usefulness of the Indo-Pacific construct to understand development in the Indian Ocean, there are "important differences between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific that will contribute to a different and unique form of multipolarity within the Indian Ocean" (p271).

Unfortunately, the volume does not cover a perspective from Africa's littoral states along the continent's Eastern seaboard. South Africa, however, is covered in an interesting chapter by Vreġ who emphasises the huge limitations and constraints on the South African Navy to play a role in the region commensurate with the country's middle power status, but Kenya and Tanzania are increasingly getting involved in Indian Ocean politics and governance. Ethiopia, though a landlocked state has expressed its maritime aspirations and determination to become a naval power and Egypt of course has the largest navy in Africa (and the Middle East). In fact, two issues that are somewhat neglected in this volume are, firstly and as mentioned, the lack of attention to African perspectives. Secondly, the potential impact of an expanded BRICS on developments in the Indian Ocean deserved more attention. This is especially so since Egypt, Ethiopia and the UAE had joined the group since the start of 2024. Vreġ is the only author to pay any attention to BRICS. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Cross Currents* makes a welcome and important contribution to perspectives and knowledge-building in the field of Strategic Studies from within the Indian Ocean. A short review cannot do justice to the high quality of the various chapters and the book is strongly recommended to students interested in and researching the politics of the Indian Ocean region within the bigger context of the evolving Indo-Pacific.

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