

# FRANCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN: A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA

AGATHE MAUPIN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world's oceans have been brought back into focus in recent years. With an estimated economic value of some \$2.5 trillion (ZAR 25.9 trillion), oceans collectively constitute the world's seventh largest economy and hold a tremendous potential for further economic development.<sup>1</sup> Today's growing interest in maritime affairs, within the international community and among policymakers, revives ancient seaborne trade routes and relationships. For emerging economies, attempts to capture a growing share of the oceans' value will lead into a rekindling of old ties and a shaping of new 'blue' partnerships. As it was once a maritime power, France makes a convincing case for the development of new perspectives with former alliances in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). By maintaining French territories in the southern part of the third-largest ocean in the world, France aims to secure an international position on principal maritime lines and grow economically, as well as to preserve, if not expand, its sphere of influence.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the world's oceans have facilitated interactions among people. As illustrated by the maritime empires built by the European powers during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, oceans offered a significant potential to increase countries' spheres

### AUTHOR

#### DR AGATHE MAUPIN

is a Senior Research Associate at the SAIIA Foreign Policy programme. She has been working on South Africa's water and energy policy since 2010.

of influence. Along with Portugal, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands, France was also a kingdom looking to enter into maritime trade routes, which were opened up by crossing the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Perceived as an open space for exploration, trade and colonisation, the oceans were key to securing global trade. Today, they remain critical in the world's trade transactions and are also a key component in buttressing development.

Spread over more than 75 million km<sup>2</sup>, bounded by India, Iran and Pakistan in the north, Africa and the Middle East in the west, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia in the east and in the south by the Antarctica Treaty (latitude 60°), the IOR is the third largest of its kind, home to about 40% of the world's population. Far from being 'neglected',<sup>2</sup> the Indian Ocean is gaining increased attention, even from countries outside its geographical limits. As pointed out by Mauritian Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam, the IOR will become the next frontier for the global economy to conquer.<sup>3</sup> Highly diverse from a political, economic, social, environmental and strategic viewpoint, with several key waterways such as the Cape of Good Hope, the Red Sea and the Straits of Malacca, the IOR can be described as a complex geopolitical system, with regional sub-systems.<sup>4</sup> Given oceans' Blue Economy<sup>5</sup> initiatives and their future growth potential, which nation would not dream of controlling them?

When France was a global maritime power, from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with a large navy, its colonial empire included several Indian Ocean islands, such as the Comoros, Madagascar and Reunion (Bourbon Island), as well as trading spots (*comptoirs*) such as Pondichéry and Chandernagor in India, and later Obock in Djibouti. The Seychelles and Mauritius were also briefly under French influence. Today, only two Indian Ocean islands – Reunion and Mayotte – remain part of the Republic of France. Both have the combined status of French department and province, meaning that they are officially part of the French national and sovereign territory.

Prominent region-wide forums for dialogue and promoting cooperation in the Indian Ocean are the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Created in 1997, IORA is now an international organisation that aims to promote regional cooperation. In 2011 France became a 'dialogue partner', which means a state or organisation 'with which IORA enjoys consultative relationships in agreed areas of common interest'.<sup>6</sup> France is also an active member of the Indian Ocean Commission, a smaller association born in 1984, which includes the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and Reunion and aims to structure small island states as a regional entity in the Indian Ocean, with priorities such as economic development and security. Compared to key players in the region, such as IORA member states Australia and India, and IORA dialogue partners China and the US, what does France bring to the table?

Among several dialogue partners a strong security concern has emerged – most notably in the Chinese<sup>7</sup> and American<sup>8</sup> positions. However, France seems to hold a more nuanced position. With a focus on the role of France in the Indian Ocean's governance, the purpose of this policy insight paper is to examine the French position in the Indian Ocean. Significant Blue Economy projects have emerged from African countries that are involved in IORA and they could benefit from additional information on France's interests and practices to enhance their own

capacities in the region. Beyond providing analysis on the geopolitics of France in the Indian Ocean, this paper will also seek to shed light on a global strategy of ocean governance by addressing questions of how the Indian Ocean gained prominence as a potential economic and diplomatic tool in the past and in recent times, and how, in the case of France, this has led to the building of a new strategy and stronger partnerships with African countries.

## THE ANCHOR ROLE OF THE FRENCH TERRITORIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

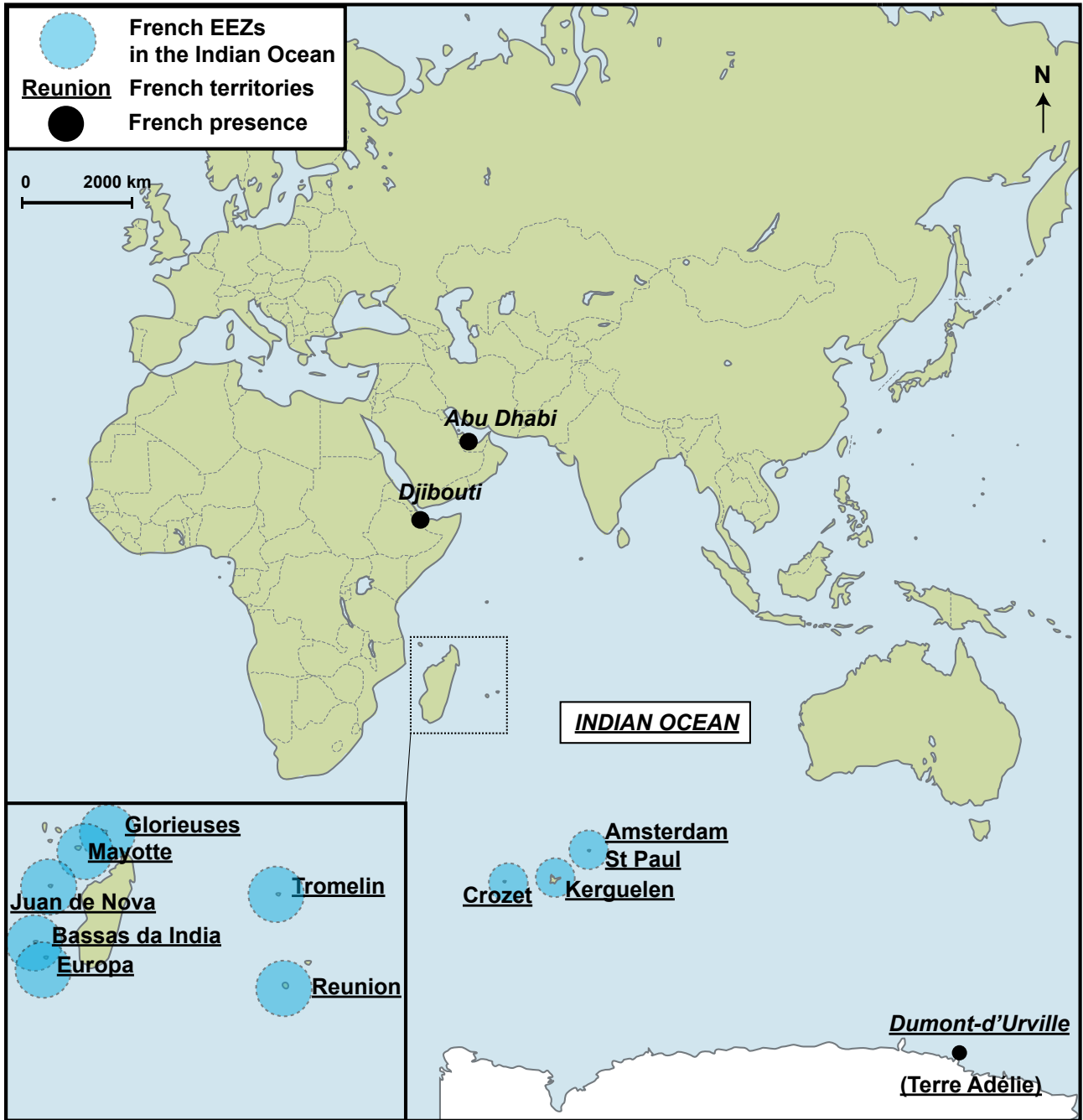
Given France's history as a maritime power, the country has traditionally maintained a high degree of influence in the Indian Ocean. By using its island territories, diplomatic and cultural ties and military presence, France exerts a high degree of influence in the region. Broadly defined, the geopolitics of the oceans relate to, on the one hand, the existing political powers and their interactions in an ocean-centred geographical space and, on the other hand, to the impact of the coastal countries' geography on their strategic, political and economic significance.

The Indian Ocean is important to France for several reasons. Firstly, as a result of having retained several island territories France benefits from their exclusive maritime rights and seabed products. Secondly, this ocean is strategically located on the maritime route between China and Europe. This route is essential to meeting the energy needs of Europe, still heavily reliant on importing oil and gas. As a result, a compelling argument for France's presence in the IOR lies in the importance of securing the maritime lanes that are used to import crude oil to Europe. Overall, given the rising global demand for oil (increasingly from emerging economies such as China and South Africa), maritime activity will continue to grow. The tremendous growth rates of countries such as China, which is increasing its leverage to gain influence in Indian Ocean countries, will drive France to strengthen an ocean-based component in any partnerships with coastal African states. 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.

Islands such as Reunion and Mayotte have been transformed into French *departments* partly to ensure that there is a constant French presence in the southern part of the Indian Ocean.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these *departments*, France also possesses military bases and strong ties with former colonies, such as Madagascar and Djibouti. In total, the French presence covers approximately 2.8 million km<sup>2</sup> in the IOR, which contributes to 20% of France's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the world. Further south, France also manages the French southern and Antarctic territories.<sup>10</sup>

While France's priority in the IOR remains navigation, there is also a strong security component, with most French defence-related activities in the area linked to piracy. As a result, the French presence translates into several naval bases. For example, the naval base of Pointe des Galets on Reunion Island houses patrol vessels, transport ships and a frigate. On Mayotte Island, France has retained a military presence through a small reaction force called the Foreign Legion.<sup>11</sup> This French military unit assists in maritime surveillance in the Mozambique Channel and conducts training for African countries such as Madagascar. In addition, France has maintained armed forces in its former colonies, such as Djibouti.<sup>12</sup> One French

**FIGURE 1** MAP OF THE FRENCH PRESENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION



Source: Author, from Cartes Vectorielles, <http://www.cartes-vectorielles.com/>; French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr>, accessed 13 January 2017

overseas regiment and a military aircraft are based in this country. For France, this is a way to control the sea routes between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, through the Suez Canal. This is essential, as most French imports of crude oil are shipped into the country through this sea lane.<sup>13</sup> Recently, France opened a military base in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With both naval and air bases, the UAE is now home to active French military troops, which were previously stationed in Djibouti and Somalia.<sup>14</sup>

Two arguments are often advanced by the French government to justify its military presence in the Indian Ocean. Firstly, it asserts that there is a need to secure maritime routes against piracy and other illegal activities. Therefore, the French navy carefully monitors fishing activities, notably over-fishing and other illegal fishing practices, in the French EEZ. Secondly, the French government argues there are several territorial disputes in the IOR that require the countries claiming a share of these territories to demonstrate their presence and ability to govern these islands.

In 2007, the French navy started anti-piracy operations by providing escort forces as a support against attacks on commercial ships. In addition to these initial anti-piracy measures, French shipping companies give information about their shipping movements. An initiative called the Maritime Safety Cell in the Horn of Africa was established in 2009. It invites all merchant ships to register on a website, which provides information about safe transit routes, including protected convoys.<sup>15</sup> In addition, operations have been conducted jointly in the IOR by European countries. For example, Operation Atalante, conducted along the Somali coast since 2008, has involved the EU and vessels from France and Spain.<sup>16</sup> Despite this joint initiative and with support from the UN Security Council, there is no agreement regarding procedures for bringing captured pirates to trial. Therefore, it is extremely complicated for a foreign navy such as the French one to convict pirates captured in the IOR.

Another concern is that a number of IOR islands are still in dispute. For example, France is in disagreement with several African countries about the Scattered Islands,<sup>17</sup> which include Bassas da India, Europa, Juan de Nova, Glorieuses and Tromelin. Most of these are strategically located in the Mozambique Channel and sovereignty over them includes an extension of the EEZ granted to a country from its shores to up to 640 000 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>18</sup> While most parts of these islands have been classified as nature reserves, they remain under French control, with access strictly restricted to the army and scientists.<sup>19</sup> Mauritius claims Tromelin; both Madagascar and the Comoros want Glorieuses; while Madagascar, with the support of the AU and the UN, claims Bassas da India, Europa and Juan de Nova. France and the Seychelles eventually reached an agreement in 2001 about the Seychelles' claim to Glorieuses.<sup>20</sup>

The Indian Ocean is strategically important to Eastern African countries, particularly the island states in the region, namely Mauritius, Madagascar and the Comoros. Access to the Indian Ocean is also essential for landlocked countries such as Zambia and Malawi, which are linked to African coastal countries' main ports in South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya. As imports and exports of petroleum and other products to and from India, China and other countries have been essential to African countries' economic development, several states have started to include a Blue Economy component in their development path.<sup>21</sup>

## FRENCH 'BLUE' INTERESTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Goal 14 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, with a focus on the sustainability of oceans, seas and marine resources, has offered a global approach towards developing ocean resources, including marine ecosystems and integrated coastal zone management. Nonetheless, countries have also sought to develop their own mechanisms and planning frameworks aimed at harnessing their national maritime resources. In the Indian Ocean, China has published a series of Five-Year Development Plans for the National Marine Economy and South Africa has launched Operation Phakisa ('hurry up' in Sesotho), to accelerate the implementation of a South African Blue Economy.<sup>22</sup>

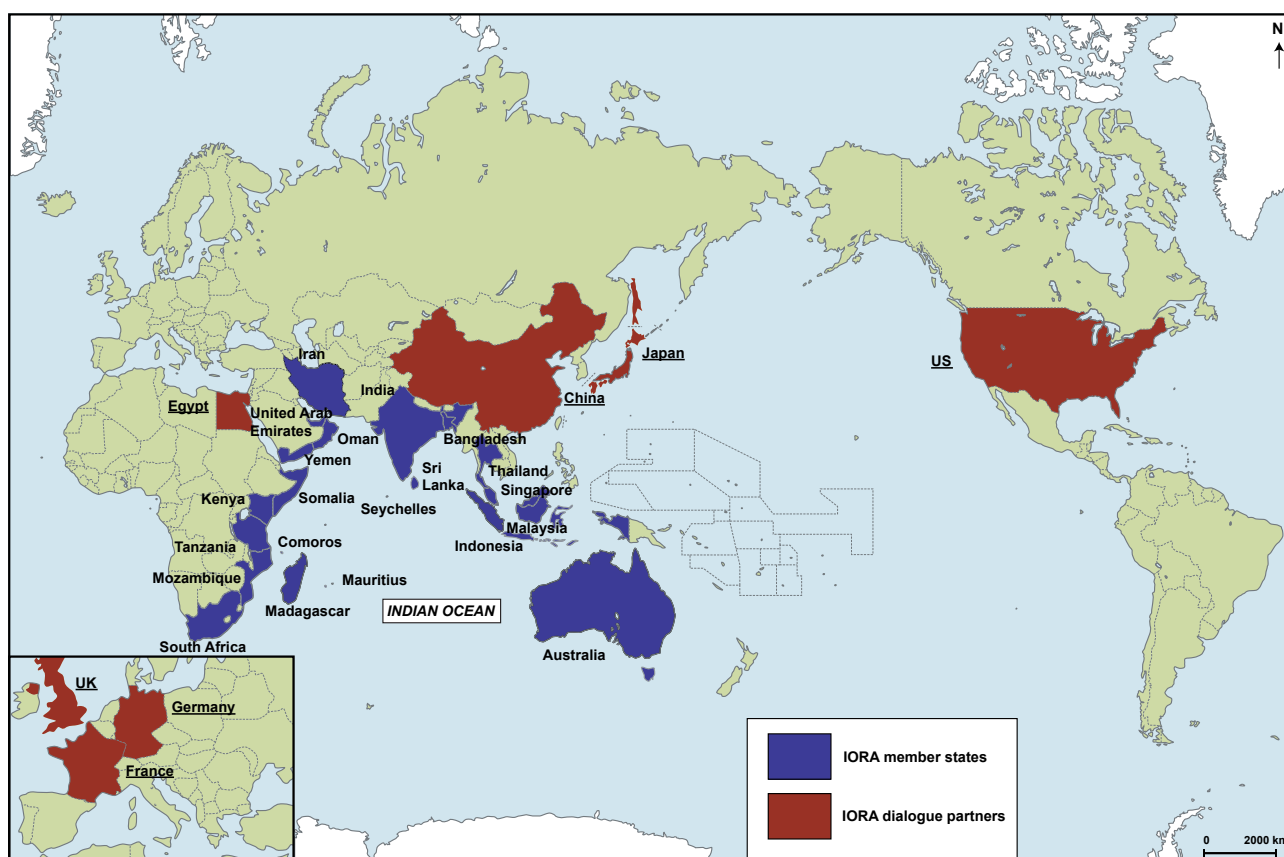
As the world's fifth-largest economy, France faces increased competition from China and India in the IOR, respectively the second- and ninth-largest economies.<sup>23</sup> As noted by several scholars, European and American maritime activities are affecting emerging economies' ocean-based ambitions.<sup>24</sup> The increase in seaborne trade, notably due to the growing share of these emerging maritime powers alongside established maritime nations, is shifting the dynamics of bilateral and regional relations. This diversifies the demand for partnerships with African countries and opens new markets.<sup>25</sup> Against this backdrop, the role of France is challenged. It has become increasingly important for France to maintain or establish new partnerships with South Africa and other African coastal economies.

To remain globally relevant as a leading economy, France needs to maintain its position in the IOR. To this end, it can rely on cultural ties and military strength to secure its interests. These interests range from the security of its citizens to economic aspects such as its EEZ and energy corridors. While the French Indian Ocean territories are home to approximately 1 million people, mostly located on the islands of Reunion and Mayotte, French interests reach far beyond these two islands' sparse populations. As noted before, other French administrative districts, such as the Scattered Islands, are also home to small military garrisons and/or teams of scientific researchers, with meteorological stations and aircraft landing strips. Importantly, all these islands, whether inhabited or not, allow for countries to draw benefits from their EEZ of 200 nautical miles, which, in the case of France, reaches a total of about 11 million km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>26</sup>

While future African Blue Economies need to factor in a potential shift in the oceans' geopolitical patterns as well as sea dominant powers, additional issues include how growing economies will develop strategies for harnessing their national ocean economic potential, and how their plans will fit into the regional framework. As mentioned earlier, the largest regional association is IORA, which includes eight African member states but also allows for dialogue partners such as the US and France.<sup>27</sup> With its headquarters in Mauritius and a small secretariat, the association has made some progress in developing structures and facilitating exchanges among member states, having recently established working groups, including an academic group and a business forum. However, despite a recent increase in visibility and the resulting leverage to address a wider range of issues, little sustained progress has been made in areas such as trade facilitation.<sup>28</sup> The rotating leadership of IORA, assumed by India (2011–2012), Australia (2013–2014) and Indonesia (2015–2016), has also slowly turned the association into a recognised regional group, with strategic importance. The next IORA chair will

be South Africa (2017–2019). Members have also come forward to serve as lead coordinators in priority sectors. For example, Indonesia is in charge of fisheries and aquaculture, the UAE is in charge of renewable ocean energy and Australia is in charge of seabed exploration and minerals.<sup>29</sup>

**FIGURE 2** MAP OF IORA MEMBER STATES AND DIALOGUE PARTNERS



Source: Author, from Cartes Vectorielles, *op. cit.*; IORA, <http://www.iora.net>, accessed 12 January 2017

Through Reunion’s status as a French *department* and a region, France has tried to become a permanent member of IORA since its formation in 1997,<sup>30</sup> and to include the Indian Ocean Commission as an observer of the IORA.<sup>31</sup> While the country has been a dialogue partner, as well as an active member of the Indian Ocean Commission (as mentioned earlier), France is still seeking to diversify its participation in regional organisations.<sup>32</sup> As coastal African economies continue to grow at a steady pace, they also become increasingly significant partners in the region. Maritime security appears to be a prerequisite for the flourishing of African Blue Economies, and the fight against piracy is also a good opportunity to improve the current ocean governance regimes and strengthen ties among coastal countries. If there is a need to harness oceans’ potential, a careful evaluation and

monitoring of what form sustainable Blue Economies should take, and the building of partnerships among IORA members and dialogue partners, will be necessary.

### **FRENCH AMBITIONS IN THE IOR: REINFORCING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**

France's efforts to maintain and, if possible, expand its influence over the Indian Ocean are aimed not only at achieving maritime security for economic purposes but also at channeling emerging powers' and competitors' influence in the region towards benefits for France. Therefore, France has tried to enhance regional and bilateral relations with significant countries in the IOR. India and China have been engaged by France at various levels and on a broad range of issues. Australia, the UAE and South Africa have also been growing strategic partnerships with France, and, more recently, several other African coastal states.<sup>33</sup>

France has established a preferred trade agreement with India around the supply of maritime military fleet and equipment, including submarines. India's naval involvement in Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles echoes China's increased diplomatic and economic links with the Comoros, for example.<sup>34</sup> As India and China share diverse views, notably around initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road,<sup>35</sup> especially in light of the construction of a Chinese naval base in Djibouti, some tensions exist among IORA members on the association's priorities. China's construction of ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka also challenges India's economic dominance in the region. India played a key role in reviving IORA, with the objective of regaining power in the Indian Ocean and curbing Chinese movement into its territorial waters. As large emerging economies with a history of antagonism, India and China's expanding influence into the Indian Ocean will have important ramifications – not just for security but also for other powers in the region, such as France and South Africa.

While Australia chaired IORA, France made several attempts to plead Reunion's case for gaining membership. France and Australia share a common interest in maritime surveillance models and both countries wish to enforce cooperation in the Southern Ocean in order to improve stability and security in the region. Nonetheless, it appears that France's relations have grown stronger in recent years with another IORA member state, South Africa. There are several reasons for this. First, as South Africa hosted the 17<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties on climate change in Durban in 2011, France was interested in the South African experience and influence on the African Group of Negotiators and the G77+China Group. Second, South Africa is ideally located at the intersection of two of the world largest oceans, the Indian Ocean to the east and the South Atlantic Ocean to the west, which provides the country with unique Blue Economy potential. Today, maritime activities contribute to barely 14% of its gross domestic product.<sup>36</sup> Considering that South Africa is regarded as one of the best liner and container shipping-connected African countries,<sup>37</sup> its maritime sector potential remains largely unexplored. Given its strategic location at the crossroads of two major maritime routes, a significant investment in the development of a South African merchant fleet could reinforce its position as a maritime trading country, in the footsteps of, for example, India and China. Among important trade partners for Africa with global aspirations, such as China and India, French influence in the Indian Ocean is often viewed as a threat to others' aspirations, notably in the context of the expanding ambitions



of emerging powers such as South Africa. These geopolitical dimensions have important implications for France and its strategic partnerships in the region, particularly with African coastal countries. In addition, South Africa has indicated that it intends to promote the interests of Africa broadly during its tenure, which starts in October 2017.

Tanzania and Mozambique are also two resource-rich countries with a rich trading past in the IOR. Today, both have embarked on ambitious programmes to upgrade their transport infrastructures, such as ports and roads, to better link their hinterland to overseas destinations and facilitate the movement of goods and people. The development of the maritime ambitions of Tanzania and Mozambique pose an interesting case for France on how to build and expand a future maritime strategy in the region and with which regional, continental and international preferred partnerships. In 2011, France also signed a partnership agreement with Kenya for closer cooperation in the areas of international security, climate change, economic partnership, development aid and education, and cultural and scientific collaboration. In the same year, France also donated a patrol ship to the Kenyan Navy to help Nairobi combat piracy in Kenyan waters.

Oceans continue to be a key avenue for political expansion, particularly for a country such as France that retains islands in the Indian Ocean to expand its EEZ, and its influence. While bilateral relations remain essential to secure economic trade and maritime routes, regional organisations have also been part of France's strategy to cement its influence in the IOR.

## CONCLUSION

Recent policy processes, such as the development of Blue Economy strategies in the IOR, have increased interest in the development of the ocean's potential, with an emphasis on untapped Blue Economies in most African coastal states. Against this rapidly changing background, France, as an old colonial and maritime power, has applied diverse strategies to buttress its position in the region.

Among France's priorities in the IOR are sustainable development concerns, as well as the equitable distribution of resources in a manner that minimises interstate competition and reduces the risk of conflict while maintaining the stability and security of maritime lanes. Undergirding all French activities is the need to maintain its influence on the Indian Ocean maritime space. Therefore, while the Indian Ocean's governance architecture remains limited to a few recognised regional bodies, France has identified several states as strategic partners.

Despite the strengthening of existing partnerships between France and countries such as the UAE, Australia, South Africa and Kenya, competition among IORA members and dialogue partners seems set to increase in the region. Emerging powers, such as China and India, with a notably steady growth rate and stronger import and export exchanges with African coastal countries, will have a greater ability to grow their influence in the region. The development of larger navies in the IOR by most emerging powers, particularly China, Brazil and South Africa, will also lessen their dependence on American and European navies.

Oceans offer opportunities to leverage power and influence, notably in sectors such as shipping, tourism, offshore oil and gas, and fisheries. Key ocean ecosystem services, as well as issues such as piracy and illegal fishing practices, highlight the extent to which the IOR countries can cooperate. There is also undeniably room for building multilateral and bilateral partnerships in tapping into oceans' potential. As one of the European leaders in tidal technologies, and a pioneer investor in deep sea explorations,<sup>38</sup> France could explore further potential partnerships within IORA towards the development of renewable energy, particularly in building cooperation to further develop sustainable ocean technologies.

## ENDNOTES

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- 5 The concept of the Blue Economy can be seen as an economic model that places a greater emphasis on the application of principles derived from natural ecosystems to economic behaviour, with a focus on sustainability, job creation and innovation. Applied to the potential wealth of the oceans and the need for the sustainable management of these resources, the Blue Economy is now also being used as an equivalent of the maritime or ocean economy.
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- 10 The French southern and Antarctic territories include the Kerguelen Islands, the Saint-Paul and Amsterdam Islands, the Crozet Islands and the Scattered Islands.
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- 33 France has several defence- and military-based agreements in the IOR with countries such as the UAE, Djibouti, the Comoros and India.
- 34 In 2011, China was one of few countries to send a special envoy, Hao Ping, to the Presidential inauguration ceremony of Comoros' new president, Ikililou Dhoinine.
- 35 The Maritime Silk Road, also known as the 'One Belt, One Road', is a Chinese initiative which aims to re-activate the ancient silk routes, on both land and sea, between the Asian and European continents. This also includes the development of economic corridors between China and countries such as Bangladesh, India and Myanmar, for example.
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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The Foreign Policy Programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. SAIIA gratefully acknowledges this support.

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MARCH 2017

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Jan Smuts House,  
East Campus,  
University of the  
Witwatersrand

PO Box 31596,  
Braamfontein 2017,  
Johannesburg,  
South Africa

Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021  
Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154  
[www.saiia.org.za](http://www.saiia.org.za)  
[info@saiia.org.za](mailto:info@saiia.org.za)



Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand  
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 • Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154  
[www.saiia.org.za](http://www.saiia.org.za) • [info@saiia.org.za](mailto:info@saiia.org.za)