

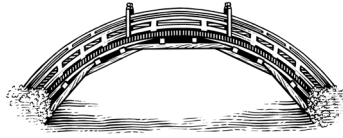
## BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Darshana M. Baruah's

*The Contest for the Indian Ocean  
and the Making of a New World Order*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024

ISBN: 9780300270914



*Frédéric Grare*

*Nilanthi Samaranayake*

*Isabelle Saint-Mézard*

*Pradeep Taneja*

*Sanjay Chaturvedi*

*Darshana M. Baruah*

## Power Asymmetry and Competition in the Indo-Pacific: The Island States of the Indian Ocean

*Frédéric Grare*

At a time of growing polarization and competition, Darshana Baruah's book *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* is an important contribution to understanding the importance of the Indian Ocean region in Indo-Pacific dynamics. The book considers the region through the perspective of its smaller powers, in particular the island states. According to Baruah, the Indian Ocean should not only be seen as a strategic continuum characterized by the need to protect sea lanes of communication and chokepoints vital to world trade where competition is only likely to intensify. Rather, the Indian Ocean is also traversed by its own political and strategic dynamics that may in turn redefine great-power competition.

Baruah is one of many authors that state that competition with China will increase in the Indian Ocean, if for no other reason because of China's dependency on both the region's energy and raw materials and its connectivity with Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe. Nor is this book the first attempt to demonstrate the region's relevance in today's power competition, for which the author argues that the Indian Ocean will be the "key theater" (p. 11). But Baruah is certainly one of very few authors to analyze the role of island states in shaping the *rappports de force* in the region and, by extension, the larger Indo-Pacific. This effort of disaggregating the Indian Ocean as a complex ecosystem involving many actors in a situation of power asymmetry makes this book a significant addition to the literature on regional geostrategic dynamics.

Baruah's main argument is that island states in the Indian Ocean are not passive objects in an ongoing larger-power competition. The recent history of this ocean region is the story of how small states gradually gained autonomy and independence from colonial and aspirant great powers alike, although with occasional ambivalence and hesitation regarding the nature of their desired relationships with the latter. Indeed, "it was island nations that sought support from bigger powers and neighbors to address evolving security issues within their own territories and environment" (p. 81). Although these island states deny playing one actor off against another, they have been smartly using larger-power rivalry to their advantage.

---

FRÉDÉRIC GRARE is a Senior Research Fellow at the National Security College at the Australian National University (Australia). He can be reached at <frederic.grare@anu.edu.au>.

Comoros and the Maldives are two such examples. Comoros sees France as a partner but also, due to France's claim to Mayotte, as a challenge to its sovereignty, and it has framed its other partnerships accordingly. China and Saudi Arabia, according to the author (as well as Russia, I would note), are also important political partners to Comoros at a time when relations between Paris and Beijing, on the one hand, and Paris and Moscow, on the other, are increasingly tense in Africa. Maldives has ostensibly diversified its political relations away from New Delhi by inviting Chinese aid to the archipelago to prevent it from over-reliance on any one country. It sees multilateral engagements and partnerships as a protection to its sovereignty. In the perspective of these states, "small islands have no choice but to foster strategic partnerships' to balance bigger players interests around their waters" (p. 89).

This relatively new situation of being key to major-power interests has not necessarily allowed the island states to dictate the terms of their relationships with the larger powers but has certainly, initially at least, forced the latter to take their interests and logics into consideration. At a time when war is increasingly illegitimate as a way of achieving political objectives, the competition has proved to be one of offer, in which island states have usually gone for the biggest bidder in fields that ignored geostrategy but that they deem essential. In the process, infrastructure building, fighting climate change, and more generally, nontraditional security issues have grown to occupy a central place in the conversation between the developed states and the less-developed countries of the Indian Ocean. In that sense Baruah's claim that the island states are reshaping great-power competition is true.

The emergence of new actors and the persistence of political fragmentation in the Indian Ocean region have facilitated this process. Traditional players such as France, India, the United Kingdom, and even the United States are no longer alone in the Indian Ocean, nor in a position to dictate the terms of exchange in the regional relationships. China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and others, including a resurgent Russia, are now alternative players in the region toward which island states could now turn.

Of particular interest is the articulation between traditional and nontraditional threats in the Indian Ocean region. The former, associated with military activities, used to define a space of mutually exclusive interests, linked mostly to the protection of sovereignty. The latter, on the contrary, was linked to the notion of common good and potential cooperation. The projection of continental conflicts at sea—including the China-India and India-Pakistan disputes, the Hamas-Israel war through the Houthis, and

the importance of the Indian Ocean for the Taiwan issue—combined with the weaponization of almost all traditional maritime activities is gradually blurring the lines between the two threat types, adding complexity to an already intricate strategic landscape.

Given the book's persuasive main argument, one may regret that the author might have occasionally generalized excessively some of the considerations. Chinese illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Indian Ocean is a reality, for example, but the ocean is not the South China Sea, and IUU fishing (and fisheries, more generally) does not have the same significance in both spaces. In the South China Sea, IUU fishing is a way for China to assert territorial claims that are nonexistent in the Indian Ocean. Fishing vessels there have at times "become a marker of presence and interest," and economic interests may draw economic protection, but the challenge is of a different nature.

But more importantly, perhaps, it would have been interesting and useful if the book had more systematically measured the limits of island states' agency. Island states are often in the unenviable situation of being dependent on the technology of larger powers—maritime domain awareness technologies being a classic example—for the protection of resources that they sometimes blame the exploitation of on these same powers. This situation both contributes to the competition between larger powers by providing a cover to dual-use initiatives (p. 138) and introduces a structural contradiction in the autonomization of the island states that in turn partly shapes larger-power competition.

Overall, despite these quibbles, *The Contest for the Indian Ocean* is a welcome contribution to the understanding of not only the Indian Ocean region but the entire Indo-Pacific, where polarization is the new reality and one that is likely to be sustained in the coming decades. For the island states, ambivalence is likely to be the new posture. If these states have no interest in seeing either of the major regional disputes (China–United States or China–India) degenerate into open conflict, polarization is also a blessing in disguise, allowing them to leverage their relations for material and statutory benefits, even if they risk losing themselves in the process, as demonstrated, for example, by the Sri Lankan case. Highlighting this new reality is unquestionably the main value of *The Contest for the Indian Ocean*. As the book implicitly and explicitly underlines, one can debate the capacity of the island states to truly change the nature of the competition between the great powers in the Indian Ocean and beyond, but not the need for these powers to change their approach to smaller states. ♦

## Prioritizing the Indian Ocean in the Indo-Pacific

*Nilanthi Samaranayake*

**D**arshana M. Baruah's book *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* takes on a topic of increasing interest to policymakers and scholars that until recently did not receive much strategic attention. Yet, China's ascendance globally over the past twenty years has raised questions about its intentions and capabilities, especially in the Indian Ocean. Baruah's book on this comparatively understudied region picks up where Robert D. Kaplan's well-read *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* left off.<sup>1</sup>

The book's major contribution is to highlight the Indian Ocean as a single space worthy of attention. I fully support setting the scope of study at this regional level. As I have previously written, discussions about the region quickly become an Indian Ocean Rorschach test depending on the eye of the beholder and where they sit.<sup>2</sup> From my observations, officials in the Obama administration began experimenting with new characterizations of the wider region by adding "Indo" to different descriptors of the Asia-Pacific. Then under the first Trump administration, officials uniformly referred to the "Indo-Pacific" region, which continued into the Biden administration. Even as U.S. allies Japan and Australia were thought leaders in developing this framing, U.S. officials' early use of "Indo" seemed mostly a signal to New Delhi of India's importance to U.S. strategy and policy rather than an acknowledgement of the importance of the Indian Ocean. This book, however, provides an important regional-level focus that includes India but also extends beyond it.

A second point Baruah makes is that "the Indian Ocean is the key theater for competition within the Indo-Pacific construct" (p. 3). This is a difficult line of argumentation given the priority of Pacific Ocean equities of both powers. She acknowledges that this is a controversial claim (p. 11);

---

**NILANTHI SAMARANAYAKE** is an Adjunct Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, D.C. (United States). She can be reached at <nsamaranayake@hotmail.com>.

**NOTE:** The views expressed here are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which she is affiliated.

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Nilanthi Samaranayake, "The Indian Ocean Rorschach Test," Observer Research Foundation, January 13, 2020.

nevertheless, she concludes that “while a military conflict might occur in the Pacific, the larger competition will take place in the Indian Ocean” (p. 11) and “as the United States and China compete for influence and power across the globe, their competition will be heightened in the Indian Ocean as *the central theater*” (p. 3, emphasis added). While considering the possibility of a “limited conflict” in the western Pacific (p. 11) may help the argument, it would be useful to provide more clarity on how the Indian Ocean will be central if a conflict, even if limited, were to occur in the Pacific.

It remains to be seen how geopolitical dynamics will play out, but at present the Indian Ocean does not appear likely to become the central theater for competition. I have found that the strategy and operational outcomes toward the end of the first Trump administration and under the Biden administration suggested that the Pacific, Arctic, and Atlantic waters closer to home are rising in priority to the United States rather than the more distant Indian Ocean.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, these trends appear to be continuing into Trump’s second term, although it is still early to assess the administration’s approach.

The book’s third argument is that “islands’ agency will shape great power competition” (p. 13). Importantly, Baruah’s research on the Indian Ocean islands included travel to Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. In particular, the book’s field research in Comoros and examination of the country’s outlook on international affairs is a unique contribution to the literature. At present, much literature on the Indian Ocean region is segmented based on disparate sets of subregional and area studies expertise. As a result, there is a dearth of disseminated knowledge about littoral countries stretching from East Africa to the Middle East to South Asia to Southeast Asia and Australia. The fieldwork and insights here will hopefully be built upon by scholars in the future.

Island agency is an important topic (p. 62), and Baruah’s calls for greater attention to the topic are timely in this era of strategic competition. The book discusses the “the power of island agency in the twenty-first century” (p. 84). She further suggests that “This is perhaps the first time that island agency has had a direct impact on great power competition, which is to say that great powers today must be aware of and study the sovereign choices exercised by island nations, and how these choices impact geopolitical conversations across the region” (p. 76). Island nations are indeed part of

---

<sup>3</sup> Nilanthi Samaranyake, “U.S. Naval Strategy in the Indian Ocean,” in *Cross Currents: The New Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean*, ed. David Brewster, Samuel Bashfield, and Justin Burke (Haberfield: ANU National Security College Press, 2025), 15.

the wider regional and international system, and their actions can be seen to have had effects on large powers—even before the contemporary era. During the Cold War, the decisions of smaller South Asian islands affected the strategy of major powers such as the United Kingdom in its military basing, with implications for the United States through their alliance. My own research has traced how instability in the UK's arrangements in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) and Maldives in the 1950s resulted in London seeking more secure basing elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> One can arguably draw a line from the UK's basing needs and efforts in Ceylon to Maldives to Diego Garcia, where it controversially established the British Indian Ocean Territory and landed in a sovereignty battle with Mauritius that remains unresolved at the time of writing.

Although islands' decisions affect major powers, it is important not to overstate the reach of these states' agency. While island states aspire to greater agency, this normative ideal remains elusive in reality given the increasing capabilities of major powers such as China and India. Smaller South Asian countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka tend to pursue international engagement with various partners, including China, to help them meet national development goals. Yet while doing so, these smaller states sometimes upset India's sense of security and find their space for autonomy is limited due to the asymmetric power relationships they have with India as the dominant country in their region.<sup>5</sup> This imbalance is an important dynamic to track as competition between India and China evolves in the Indian Ocean.

A final attribute of *The Contest for the Indian Ocean* worth noting is that it clearly explains the essential facts and history of the Indian Ocean to readers who may not have much background on the region. Because the Indian Ocean has been an esoteric topic compared with studies about controversies in the waters of the Pacific, the book's readability will help expand knowledge about the region. As a result of this book, the Indian Ocean will hopefully receive greater attention and understanding by officials as they develop strategy and policy toward this dynamic region. ♦

---

<sup>4</sup> Nilanthi Samaranayake, "Indian Ocean Basing and Access: How Smaller States Navigate Major Power Competition," U.S. Institute of Peace, August 10, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Nilanthi Samaranayake, "Sri Lanka Navigating Major Power Rivalry: How Domestic Drivers Collide with the International System," *Small States and Territories* 6, no. 1 (2023): 62–63.

## The Agency of Island States in the Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean

*Isabelle Saint-Mézard*

**D**arshana Baruah's *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* is a welcome contribution to the growing corpus of works on the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean and the great-power competition dynamics in this maritime space. The originality of her approach lies in the book's focus on the ocean's geography and conceptualization of the maritime domain as a strategic space in its own right. She pays particular attention to critical zones such as chokepoints, sea lines of communication, and the ocean's numerous islands. From this vantage point, Baruah analyzes geopolitical rivalries among major powers, with a compelling emphasis on the significance and agency of island states in shaping regional dynamics.

A fascinating issue raised by the book is the absence of a shared sense of belonging among the island states Comoros, Madagascar, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, Baruah identifies a "common cultural thread" woven through these island societies that is rooted in a complex blend of Indian, African, and Arab influences alongside the legacy of European colonialization. Yet, she observes that "unlike in the Pacific or the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean does not have a shared island community" (p. 13). She further underscores the limited interaction among the islands themselves, as well as the low levels of mutual awareness and understanding between the island states of the eastern and western Indian Ocean, despite their shared particularities and common challenges.

To account for this disconnect, the author points to the enduring legacy of British and French colonial rule that has divided the region along linguistic lines between English-speaking islands, such as Maldives and Sri Lanka, and French-speaking ones, like Madagascar and Comoros. She further explains that "the island nations of the Indian Ocean region came to be divided as per the continents they were categorized as part of" (p. 74). This process of continentalization led Sri Lanka and Maldives to turn toward

---

**ISABELLE SAINT-MÉZARD** is Professor at the French Institute of Geopolitics at Paris 8 University (France). She is also a Research Associate Fellow on South Asia at the Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI). Her research interests include India's foreign and defense policies, great-power competition in the Indian Ocean, and the strategic role of the Indian Ocean within the broader Indo-Pacific framework. She can be reached at <i.stmezard@gmail.com>.

South Asia, while Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles were integrated into the African sphere—despite the fact that Mauritius, and Seychelles to a lesser extent, retain strong South Asian cultural identities. On this point, the book's analysis could have been enriched by a deeper exploration of the agency of the islands themselves.

A pertinent example is the initiative undertaken by the islands of the southwest Indian Ocean to forge a regional identity under the banner of *Indianocéanie*. This neologism, which could be translated as “Indianoceanian,” was coined in 1960 by Camille de Rauville, a Mauritian writer, who lived for many years in Madagascar and worked as curator of the Carnegie Library in Mauritius. In his words, Indianocéanie referred to the “affinities of sensibility, customs, and tendencies whose roots lie deep within the life of the soul and the community of peoples living geographically side by side or amalgamating throughout their shared existence—from the Mascarenes, from Madagascar, with ramifications extending across the entire Indian Ocean.”<sup>1</sup> Although the term remained confined to limited circles for nearly five decades, it has gained increasing visibility since the 2010s both in academic literature and—interestingly—in the discourse of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), a subregional organization comprising Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (France), and Seychelles. Through its adoption of the Indianocéanie concept, the IOC has sought not only to replace the geographic terminology of the “southwest Indian Ocean” but also to cultivate a distinct subregional identity. While originally conceived as a culturally grounded and inclusive notion extending across the Indian Ocean, Indianocéanie has been reconfigured by the IOC into a more politically oriented project, centered on the southwest Indian Ocean and articulated primarily through the French language.

On the topic of the southwest Indian Ocean, another compelling contribution of the book lies in its analysis of that subregion's shifting geopolitics. Particularly for a French readership, it offers valuable insights into how France is perceived there. Baruah details the disgruntlement expressed by Comoros and Madagascar regarding France's role as a principal partner. According to her account, Comorian authorities believe that France not only “stole” the island of Mayotte but also actively obstructed efforts to gain international recognition for and support in resolving the territorial

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in French in Yves Combeau, “Océan Indien et Indianocéanie” [Indian Ocean and Indianoceanian], trans. Isabelle Saint-Mézard, *Outre-mers. Revue d'histoire* 107, no. 402–3 (2019): 4.

dispute (p. 93).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, both Comoros and Madagascar express dissatisfaction with France's ambition to monitor their waters while offering only outdated, second-hand vessels, in their view creating a structural dependence on French maintenance systems. This accumulation of grievances has prompted both island states to diversify their partnerships as a means of recalibrating their relationship with France. Baruah underscores China's effective engagement in infrastructure development in Comoros and references emerging Russian involvement in Madagascar.

In other words, Baruah depicts a situation that is increasingly precarious for France. To maintain its influence in the subregion, Paris must promote cooperation with the island states of the southwest Indian Ocean, despite being embroiled in long-standing territorial disputes with several of them, including Comoros over Mayotte, Madagascar over the Scattered Islands, and Mauritius over Tromelin Island. While this contradiction was manageable when France was the dominant power in this part of the ocean, the growing engagement of these island states with alternative partners—among them strategic competitors such as Russia and China—has rendered France's position more vulnerable. One concern in Paris is that these rivals may seek to exploit France's unresolved territorial disputes to fuel anti-French sentiment and undermine its regional standing. At the same time, France does not appear willing to initiate any process of retrocession regarding the Scattered Islands—let alone Mayotte—as these territories occupy strategically vital positions in the Mozambique Channel, a key transit corridor for international maritime trade.

In response to the growing influence of China and Russia in the southwest Indian Ocean, Paris has moved to reaffirm its sovereignty on the ground and to deepen its political engagement with the island states of the region. In 2019, President Emmanuel Macron became the first French head of state to visit the Scattered Islands, a move that provoked strong reactions from Madagascar. In April 2025, he visited the French overseas departments of Mayotte and Réunion, followed by a trip to Madagascar—the first by a French president in two decades.<sup>3</sup> During his visit to Madagascar, Macron addressed aspects of the country's fraught colonial legacy, including the violence perpetrated by French troops on the island in the late nineteenth century and the restitution of stolen cultural property. He also launched

---

<sup>2</sup> For a critical analysis of the French narrative on Mayotte's choice to join France, see Nicolas Roinsard, *Une situation postcoloniale: Mayotte ou le gouvernement des marges* [A Postcolonial Situation: Mayotte or the Government of the Margins] (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002), 352.

<sup>3</sup> A planned visit to Mauritius was cancelled due to his attendance at the funeral of Pope Francis in Rome.

cooperation projects in the energy, education, and agriculture sectors. Thus, Macron's visit appears to vindicate Baruah's central argument concerning the agency of island states within the broader context of strategic competition among great powers.

That said, the author might have also mentioned the dire situation in Mayotte, which arguably represents France's most pressing challenge in the region. In recent years, the island has faced acute water shortages, persistent poverty, and limited welfare services—compounded by juvenile delinquency and sustained flows of illegal migrants from Comoros. The devastation wrought by Tropical Cyclone Chido in late 2024 only deepened the crisis. Five months after the storm, France was still struggling to restore basic infrastructure and public services, a situation that starkly underscored the inability of a once-dominant regional power to provide even minimal protection and support to the citizens of this overseas department.

As illustrated by this review, I was especially interested in, and have focused on here, the book's contribution on the evolving geopolitics of the southwest Indian Ocean—a subregion often relegated to the periphery in broader analyses of the Indian Ocean. At the same time, the book is far larger in geographical scope and thematic and analytical engagement. It offers valuable historical insight into the United States' Indian Ocean strategy during the Cold War, highlights China's present and future vulnerabilities in this maritime space, and offers a nuanced analysis of India's approach to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Overall, this book is a highly recommended resource for scholars and students studying the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. ♦

## The Island States Have Agency in the Contest for the Indian Ocean—but How?

Pradeep Taneja

Ever since the People's Liberation Army Navy began actively deploying its naval assets in the Indian Ocean, there has been a growing body of literature on China's Indian Ocean footprint and what it means for the stability and security of the region. Starting with a small flotilla of conventional vessels in the Gulf of Aden as part of an international antipiracy task force in 2008, China's presence in the Indian Ocean has grown to include visits by conventional and nuclear-powered submarines, frequent deployments of marine research vessels that are capable of data collection for military purposes, and the establishment of a permanent base in Djibouti.

Although Darshana Baruah's book does not have China in its title, *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* is animated by the growing competition between China and the long-term resident powers in the region, including India, the United States, France, Australia, and Japan. The book does not seem to have an overarching question that it seeks to answer; instead, it seeks to make three main arguments. First, it argues that we must view the Indian Ocean as one continuous zone, theater, or geographic space. Second, the competition with China will become more intense as Chinese interests and capabilities in the region grow. Third, the Indian Ocean island states will not be mere onlookers in the 21st century—they will shape the great-power competition.

In making the first argument, Baruah argues that the island states in the Indian Ocean were divided by politics and great-power interests in the colonial and Cold War periods, so much so that the islanders in the east and west of Indian Ocean were unfamiliar with each other. She also observes the lack of a common Indian Ocean identity in the post-Cold War period or perception of common threats that could foster a sense of unity among the island states.

However, the author insists that there are now common cultural threads emerging among these islands. A new Indian Ocean and maritime identity is arising. This new identity is shaped by a desire to break free of a

---

PRADEEP TANEJA is a Senior Lecturer in Asian politics, political economy, and international relations at the University of Melbourne (Australia). He can be reached at <ptaneja@unimelb.edu.au>.

single security partner and seize the opportunities offered by the increasing geopolitical competition among bigger powers. The book claims that the island states are now “bound together by a common maritime identity—the Indian Ocean” (p. 17). But apart from the author’s own observations during field work, other evidence is not presented to support this contention.

In my view, it is debatable if such a common identity is indeed forming. Even if it is, how would viewing the Indian Ocean as a continuous zone or theater, ignoring vast differences in subregional dynamics, be helpful to policy planners and strategic thinkers? Also, in referring to the Indian Ocean, the book uses “continuous zone,” “theater,” and “geographic space” interchangeably, but each of these terms has specific meanings in international relations and social sciences more broadly. For example, treating the entire Indian Ocean—from the east coast of Africa to Australia—as one strategic theater is unlikely to be very helpful in strategic planning for any of the major powers in the region. The book argues that if we “continue to study the Indian Ocean through the lens of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, opportunities will be missed, and indicators of what is emerging in the maritime domain, and how it will shape geopolitical narratives, will go unnoticed” (p. 155). For the principal argument of the book, this seems far from persuasive.

The second argument—that competition with China will significantly increase as its interests and capabilities in the region grow—is consistent with the general trend and is supported by the wider literature. Here, the author’s main contention is that the Indian Ocean is the “primary ocean of vulnerabilities for Beijing” (p. 49) and that “it will become necessary for Beijing to build capabilities, with the goal of protecting its [sea lines of communication], chokepoints, and, most importantly, its economic and strategic engagements across the wider ocean” (p. 49). As China does so, it invites efforts to contain its influence by the United States, India, and other resident powers.

This point is generally well made in the book, although it is largely based on Western and Indian scholarship, with little engagement with literature originating from China. Interestingly, the author argues that despite the buildup of capabilities, China is “unlikely to enter into a military conflict with anyone in the Indian Ocean” in the next five to ten years (p. 50).

The book’s third argument is that the island states will shape the great-power competition in the Indian Ocean. This argument is developed in chapter 4, which is based on interviews conducted by the author in the island states themselves, and it demonstrates the differences in perceptions

of geopolitical and security interests between the major powers and the island states. While this section of the book rightly makes the point that small island states have greater agency today than they did during the Cold War, it does not explain the conditions under which this agency can be exercised. In other words, what are the determining factors influencing the power of the island states to exercise their agency? After all, some states are more successful than others in exerting influence on major powers to shape their interests.

In discussing the island states' agency in managing competition between China, on the one hand, and the United States and U.S. partners in the Indian Ocean, on the other, the book highlights the differences between how the United States, India, and the other resident powers in the region perceive China's growing role in the region and how the island states view it. While the resident powers might see China's role as problematic or even threatening, the author argues that "China is not a problematic player for many nations" in the region (p. 158). This is an important point that deserves careful consideration by U.S. and Indian policymakers.

While a clearly defined research problem and conceptual framework would have further strengthened the arguments, overall *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* is a welcome addition to the literature on the security dynamics in the Indian Ocean, and it demonstrates the author's expertise as a researcher working on the Indian Ocean and maritime security issues. ♦

## Opening, Broadening, and Deepening the “Geo” in the Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean

*Sanjay Chaturvedi*

To “reconceptualize, rethink, and reframe our mental maps on the Indian Ocean” (p. 18) is an important, timely, and challenging academic pursuit with profound and far-reaching policy implications for diverse stakeholders in this part of the world ocean. With *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order*, Darshana M. Baruah has achieved the goal in this *tour de force* with commendable success. The value of this endeavor can be measured not only in terms of issues the author skillfully addresses or dots connected but also by the critical thinking that she provokes on some of the persisting silences and silencing in Indian Ocean studies and maritime security. After all, major-power struggles are not only about material capabilities, and the politics behind knowledge production are complex. The crafting of new conceptual categories, such as “Indo-Pacific,” and the ability to impose meanings on land and seascapes is a form of power in and of itself.

Baruah deployed the term “theater” multiple times throughout the book, which is unsurprising given her focus on major-power struggles. Given that the act of performance is at the core of the concept of “theater,” we must ask who the major performers (actors, entities, institutions, organizations) and audiences are in the Indian Ocean theater. Moreover, a view *of* an island may not be the same as a view *from* an island. The question of maritime identity is equally complex and compelling; a coastal location does not automatically translate to maritime consciousness or orientation. I found the author’s mention of “maritime capitals” (p. xvii) intriguing. The moment one opens up the “maritime” using a critical constructivist lens, as ably done by Philip E. Steinberg in his seminal study,<sup>1</sup> a kaleidoscope of multiple identities of the ocean as a resource provider, a transport surface, a battleground, and force field reveals itself and compels us to appreciate the need for a more nuanced understanding of Indian Ocean and multiple framings of this vast, diverse space. Invoking the geohistorical perspective,

---

**SANJAY CHATURVEDI** is Senior Vice President, Dean of the Faculty of International Studies, and the Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at South Asian University (India). He can be reached at <sanjaychaturvedi@sau.int>.

<sup>1</sup> Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

one might argue that the framing of the ocean as a “single continuous theater” (p. 18) in which geopolitical and geostrategic competition is played out privileges state-centric strategic geographies in comparison to alternative framings and formats rooted in human-political geographies. Once approached and analyzed with a critical geohistorical lens, the remarkably complex Indian Ocean region of diverse subregions, political systems, economies, and societies is likely to reveal the labyrinth of its world and legacies, including its diaspora. The spatial format of a multiplex maritime order for the Indian Ocean, inspired by the writings of Amitav Acharya, Antoni Esteveordal, and Louis W. Goodman, invites attention to the role that maritime regionalism and its embodiment in the Indian Ocean Rim Association can play in augmenting what these scholars describe as “interaction capacity” and the role it could or should play in augmenting international cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

If we choose to deploy a geopolitical economic perspective as Collin Flint does in *Near and Far Waters: The Geopolitics of Sea Power*,<sup>3</sup> then the reality of global knowledge-power hierarchies and inequalities, marked by core-periphery relationships, are inextricably intertwined with geopolitics and its aggressive assertions. According to Flint, “Global inequalities may seem to be a topic separate from geopolitics, and a call to think about them may seem naive.... [However,] geopolitics and economics are not separate fields but intertwined sets of power relations.”<sup>4</sup>

In a succinct introduction to the book, Baruah underlines the growing importance of geography, rise of new players, and the role of islands in shaping great-power competition. One significant insight, reinforced by her travels through the Indian Ocean islands, is that despite the commonalities she observed in terms of everyday challenges, “there was little awareness of shared differences and convergences with islands in the east and west, which were unaware of each other’s efforts, cultures, and even societies” (p. 16). The contention that “as a result of a new geopolitical competition, as well as the islands’ initiative to play this competition to their advantage,” that “they are for the first time bound together by a common maritime identity” (p. 17) is quite thought-provoking. Chapter 2, taking the case of Diego Garcia

---

<sup>2</sup> Amitav Acharya, Antoni Esteveordal, and Louis W. Goodman, “Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order,” *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (2023): 2339–65 ~ <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad242>.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Flint, *Near and Far Waters: The Geopolitics of Sea Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

and drawing on U.S. archival sources, provides valuable insights into the great-power competition in the ocean. Missing, however, are views from Mauritius on the decolonization of the Chagos Archipelago. Under a 2025 agreement, the United Kingdom will cede sovereignty of the archipelago to Mauritius but will pay for the right to operate the Diego Garcia military base there.

Reading through this chapter with its emphasis on the strategic importance of Diego Garcia and the Indian Ocean in U.S. geostrategy, I was reminded of the classical geopolitical theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford J. Mackinder, and Nicholas J. Spykman and wondered how the author would have assessed their imprints, if any, on the unfolding geopolitical contest between the United States and China. Taking note of the following conclusion by the author, “Today, as the U.S. continues to view China through the lens of competition, the need for a review and a new strategy for the Indian Ocean in the twenty-first century is overdue—especially if the last written strategy dates from the mid-1970s,” (p. 45) I reflected on the implications of the “Indo” part of the hyphenated “Indo-Pacific” concept being generally approached and analyzed by the dominant “Pacific” location in U.S. constructs. That U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Central Command, and Africa Command all have a direct bearing on the spatial construct of the Indian Ocean theater insightfully prompts the author to call for an Indian Ocean strategy.

In chapter 4, it is heartening to see Baruah’s strong emphasis on island nation agency in the great-power competition. She rightly underlines the critical importance of location, especially on the margins. Scale matters and carries both ethical-moral and geopolitical implications. Take, for example, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the Indian Ocean. The numerous challenges faced by the island’s fishers and artisanal fisheries deserve closer attention. This is one example where the “geo” in geopolitics acquires the form of human-social-cultural geographies of the islanders in the agenda of critical security studies. Only by pluralizing the geo in geography (physical, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and legal) can we broaden and deepen our understanding of an island’s identity and what it means as a society, economy, and polity. Failure to appreciate diversity also risks defining an isle only in terms of its insular physical geography or, at best, a juridical geography manipulated on the geopolitical chessboard by the middle and major powers. No less important is the question of ontological security, which underlines the critical importance of having a

nuanced appreciation of an island's identity constituted by and constitutive of multiple geographies, including historical, social, political, and cultural.

To conclude, the insights offered in *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* lead to five major takeaways but with a feeling that this vibrant work could have engaged more with them. First, the fourth industrial revolution has impacted a multispatial maritime security multiplex. Notwithstanding the field of international relations' resilient state-centric dominant spatiality, major-power struggles are multispatial in ways hitherto unanticipated. The classical geopolitical binaries of landpower-seapower may not be as neatly visible in contemporary major-power rivalries as some expect. Yet they seem to be present in the geostrategic calculus of the major actors. At the same time, today, maritime security and its physical geographies intersect with complex functional geographies (for example, undersea cables and satellites in geostationary orbit). The author is most persuasive in asserting that the boundary between traditional and nontraditional threats to maritime security is blurred.

Second, a geopolitical economy perspective focused on material inequalities and knowledge-power hierarchies in the Indian Ocean region, which includes the major-power rivalries and their implications for the selected islands, may reveal a far more complete, revealing, and rewarding multifaceted reality. In other words, I am curious to explore how a geopolitical economy perspective, cast in a spatial format of multiplexity marked by primary-subsidiary relationships and hierarchical interdependence, combined with the focus provided by Baruah on geostrategic theater, will provide new analysis and insights.

Third, although the author does mention that "islands are becoming a new theater for competition among big and middle powers" (p. 145), the role of the middle powers, particularly Indonesia and Australia, will continue to invite more attention and analysis.

Fourth, how the major-power rivalries are impacting, and in cases even shaping, the contours of the domestic politics of these island states will continue to demand close attention and critical examination.

Last, but by no means least, is the harsh reality of the Anthropocene, the pushing of the planetary boundaries and the risks associated with the securitization and militarization of climate change. *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* gives us food for thought and remarkable insights further to enrich the vibrant research agenda of Indian Ocean studies. Neither the Indian Ocean nor Indian Ocean studies are neglected nor marginal anymore. ♦

## Author's Response: Reframing the Indian Ocean Debate

*Darshana M. Baruah*

My primary goal in writing *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* was to attempt to connect the many dots, subregions, issues, complexities, challenges, and opportunities that exist within the Indian Ocean while contributing to the existing literature on the subject. I am grateful to all five reviewers who have so generously reviewed the book and contributed to these debates by offering their insights and questions. It has been an ambitious endeavor to cover in one book the complex dynamics spanning the subregions of the eastern coast of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and the island nations that lie across the vast ocean.

All the reviewers acknowledge the importance of the book's contribution to the Indian Ocean literature, and for that I am grateful. There is much literature offering specific and detailed views of the many subregions of the Indian Ocean, its imperial histories, and its socioeconomic developments and challenges, as well as the country perspectives of nations such as India, the United States, and European players. My aim, as I wrote in the book's preface, was to tell the story of developments across the ocean, where the players, issues, and challenges are pillars that together contribute toward the ocean's story. Doing so meant I had to choose the story that in my opinion would be most helpful in understanding the Indian Ocean as it is today.

The book's primary audience is policymakers and students who could benefit from an Indian Ocean overview supported by in-depth research. My goal was to highlight new ideas, connections, and perspectives that might be overlooked in bureaucracies tasked with prioritizing day-to-day operations. From there, policymakers and academics can pick and choose areas of focus that complement their own national and strategic priorities. Pradeep Taneja in his review observed the lack of a single research question that I set out to answer. However, I was not attempting to answer just one question; to me, and for my research, there are more questions to be answered. In writing

---

**DARSHANA M. BARUAH** is currently the Shangri La Dialogue Senior Fellow for Indo-Pacific Defence and Strategy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)–Asia (Singapore). She can be reached at <darshana.baruah@icloud.com>.

**NOTE:** *The Contest for the Indian Ocean and the Making of a New World Order* was written and published before the author joined IISS–Asia in February 2025.

a book on this vast ocean, I therefore used frameworks (within which lie specific research questions and curiosities) that connect the different themes of the Indian Ocean and so offer a holistic view.

A valid question raised by several reviewers about the premise of island agency, a central theme in the book, warrants further inspection. How can small island nations truly have an impact? As with any relatively new or different lens for viewing geopolitics, I think the answer is manifold and to some extent depends on the aspect of influence that most intrigues the reader. My purpose was to highlight the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean also from the view of small island nations. It is not just the choices of competing big players that alter the geopolitics of the region; the choices made by the island nations can also introduce new and at times rival interests into the regional dynamics. Frédéric Grare underlines this point in noticing that the range of players mentioned in the book includes Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Grare notes that Russia is another important player, and I agree; however, in the midst of its ongoing aggression against Ukraine, Moscow's commitment to the western Indian Ocean was tougher to substantiate and assess more deeply. Nonetheless, it does exist, and I anticipate Russia will return its attention to the region sooner rather than later.

Isabelle Saint-Mézard and Grare both reference the unique perspective for France in the western Indian Ocean. Outside of France and India, the role France plays in the Indian Ocean goes almost unnoticed. This is beginning to change, however. Saint-Mézard refers to recent visits by Emmanuel Macron to the Scattered Islands (the first ever by a French head of state), Mayotte and Reunion (the first in two decades), and Madagascar as a response to growing concerns about the region in Paris amid islands choosing to exercise their agency in forming new and varied partnerships. She notes: "Thus, Macron's visit appears to vindicate Baruah's central argument concerning the agency of island states within the broader context of strategic competition among great power." The visits by Macron were not an initiative from the Élysée in support of some wider strategy; they were a response to the islands' demonstration of economic and foreign policy choices. I, of course, do not want to simplify or overextend the impact of the islands' agency. Yet I do believe, as I noted in the book, that this issue needs to be studied and taken into account when formulating policies and approaches toward the Indian Ocean.

Nilanthi Samaranayake and Taneja, among the reviewers, highlight what is perhaps the most controversial argument in the book—that the

Indian Ocean will be the key theater for competition. This is another issue that would benefit from further examination, including from country perspectives. In the case of India, for example, the ocean will certainly be the primary theater for competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. For this and the other reasons I explain in the book demonstrating the Indian Ocean as the ocean of vulnerabilities, the ocean will play an integral part in the intensifying competition. Without going deep into the details (which I assess in chapter 3 on chokepoints and naval competition), it is no secret that Beijing wants to be a great power and identifies naval strength as an essential tool toward its great-power ambitions. To truly be considered a naval power, a nation needs to be able to operate, protect, and if needed disrupt, the oceans and seas beyond those it relies on itself for resources and its own neighborhood. In my opinion, China's choice of Djibouti for its first overseas military facility is both an opportunity and an indication of a long-term strategic goal for the Indian Ocean. An important factor to consider is that a stronger China in the Indian Ocean will only embolden the country further in the Pacific. Some nations, such as the United States, could perhaps disengage further and even abandon the ocean should it come down to absolute resource prioritization. However, many countries, including European nations, will not be able to afford disengagement. I agree this is a tough argument to make in Washington, D.C., one which I actively engaged with while living there. However, peripheral treatment of the Indian Ocean will bring with it multiplied challenges in the Pacific, making the ocean both a blind spot and a space for competition. Another dimension of this issue is the conversation between military prioritization and resource and strategic competition. The Indian Ocean is important for the latter in the short to medium term.

Sanjay Chaturvedi in his review aptly connects other international relations approaches, such as constructivism and classical realism, and older and disappearing themes with the new perspectives the book offers. He observes: "To 'reconceptualize, rethink, and reframe our mental maps on the Indian Ocean' (p. 18) is an important, timely, and challenging academic pursuit with profound and far-reaching policy implications for diverse stakeholders in this part of the world ocean." I appreciate his opinion that the book achieves this "*tour de force* with commendable success."

The history of the Indian Ocean is certainly rich and carries centuries of depth. There are at least four deeper books worth of material within the themes and frameworks that I have presented in *The Contest for the*

*Indian Ocean.* My aim for this book was to open up new debates and reframe existing conversations so that the Indian Ocean may go from being a peripheral afterthought to an important topic in discussions about the Indo-Pacific. ◆



