



**ANALYSIS**

# **The Blue Economy in the Indo-Pacific** Prospects and Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

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*The Indo-Pacific region is broadly represented within academic and policy language in two contrasting views. It is a global geopolitical site of contestation between the United States and China. It is also the emerging locale of global economic growth, with developed economies desiring to be part of this economically connected and dynamic region. Within the greater Indo-Pacific area, the Indian Ocean region is also characterized as simultaneously susceptible to increasing geopolitical contestation as well as demonstrating the promise of a dynamic economic region with increased levels of cooperation and connectivity. This paper examines the prospects and challenges for increased cooperation within the Indian Ocean region as part of the larger Indo-Pacific area. It specifically explores the way the “blue economy” impacts the patterns of contestation and cooperation.*

*The paper first looks briefly at the origin and evolution of the blue economy as a policy goal within broader public policy debates. It then outlines the utility of employing the term as a public policy goal for the region. The second section discusses the evolution of traditional and non-traditional security threats in the region more recently and the way this impacts the prospects for pursuing blue economy goals. The third section explores the overlap between geopolitical concerns and geoeconomic imperatives in the region and considers the prospects for greater cooperation when such overlaps occur. The final section charts near-future scenarios within the context of states pursuing blue economy goals. It outlines both best-case and worst-case scenarios, examining the role extraregional states can take on and the extent to which the increased securitization of non-traditional challenges imposes limits on constructing durable habits of cooperation between states.*

## **The blue economy as a public policy goal: The Indian Ocean region**

The Indian Ocean covers approximately one fifth of the total ocean area of the world and stretches from the southern tip of Africa to the west to Australia to the east. In the north it is bound by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, while the Southern Ocean marks its southern boundary. It is home to several bays, seas and straits, such as the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the gulfs of Aden and Oman, the Straits of Hormuz, the Andaman Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca and Sunda Straits. The littoral states within the Indian Ocean region range from small island nations to continents as well as dependencies and overseas territories of the United Kingdom and France.

The blue economy (sometimes also referred to as the “oceans economy”) concept originates from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (UNCTAD, 2014). Following on from this conference, the United Nations published the Blue Economy Concept Paper (UN, 2014), which defined the public policy goal: “At the core of the Blue Economy concept is the de-coupling of socioeconomic development from environmental degradation” (UN, 2014, p. 3). The World Bank (2017) viewed the blue economy as “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health”. The blue economy, as a public policy goal, thus involves negotiating the tension between the opportunities the ocean economy provides and the threats such activities pose (Lee and others, 2020). There is an appreciation that this negotiation, which partly involves the crafting of acceptable and realistic blue economy goals predominantly, though not completely, involved states agreeing to cooperate, given the unique

nature of the maritime domain. The varying levels of state sovereignty over different maritime spaces and the contested interpretations of international law and norms pertaining to these maritime spaces means inter-state cooperation is essential to realize blue economy goals.

States in the Indian Ocean region have consistently declared their intentions to achieve the blue economy goals. The Jakarta Declaration on Blue Economy of 2017 committed the member states of the Indian Ocean Rim Association to 23 principles in pursuit of the goals (IORA, 2017). These range from building stronger legal and regulatory regimes to developing more robust public–private partnerships to leveraging various sources of finance, including collaboration with partner states outside the region (some of which are dialogue partners with the Indian Ocean Rim Association). The 2017 Jakarta Declaration builds on the earlier 2015 Mauritius Declaration on the Blue Economy, which contained similar principles in pursuit of the blue economy goals (IORA, 2015). An essential condition in realizing the goals contained in both these declarations is sustained cooperation between states.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association has identified six priority areas for its blue economy agenda: (i) fisheries and aquaculture; (ii) renewable ocean energy; (iii) seaports and shipping; (iv) offshore hydrocarbons and seabed minerals; (v) marine biotechnology research and development; and (vi) tourism. For fisheries, the concern is tackling illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing to address issues relating to both marine biodiversity as well as livelihoods of coastal communities within littoral States in the Indian Ocean region. Renewable energy efforts concern

both the imperative to harness “blue” energy from the ocean as well as increasing interactions between the oil and gas industries and the renewable ocean community because both have important roles in the region.

Building cooperation in the construction and efficient management of seaports is the third priority area, with maritime trade expansion an important aspect for the Indian Ocean Rim Association. The limited amount of data on mineral resources in the exclusive economic zones of the littoral states, and their lack of capacity to explore and mine these minerals, is another blue economy goal for the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Deeper cooperation in helping states harness the economic gains of these minerals is a vital objective. Blue biotechnology is increasingly becoming a crucial area, by leveraging technology to develop sustainable fisheries production, selective breeding of species and bio-sensing technologies for environmental marine monitoring. Sustainable marine tourism is an emerging imperative in the Indian Ocean region. It focuses on balancing the economic benefits that accrue from tourism while trying to prevent or slow down irreversible environmental damage arising specifically from coastal tourism.

Within the Indian Ocean region, the blue economy goals have been fiercely debated by politicians, academics, economists and conservationists, among others. This is not surprising, considering how the region is defined completely by its maritime quality (as opposed to other regions that are not completely defined in maritime terms), with littoral states facing the effects of environmental degradation and climate change as well as impoverished coastal communities. The tension between conservation and growth is a policy quandary for leaders in the region, specifically for Small Island Developing States as well as for local leaders in coastal communities in these states. For leaders in many states, there is an obvious need to prioritize and push for climate action because they are most affected by its impact. However, there is a strong political imperative to also leverage their littoral position in pursuit of economic gains, which may lead to possible long-term environmental damage. The case of the Maldives is a good example of this tension. In 2016 and under the leadership of then-President Abdulla Yameen, the Maldives embarked on a “transformative economic agenda”, which involved reclaiming land to build luxury tourist resorts on several coral atolls (Darby, 2017). Against the backdrop of coral bleaching caused by ocean warming brought about by El Niño, this reclamation set off alarm bells among environmental groups. But the government argued that it could not be expected to put off development projects indefinitely despite global environmental concerns (Vidal, 2017). The change of government in the Maldives in

2018 led to a slowdown of such reclamation and building of luxury resorts. It also led to widespread allegations of graft in the allocation of land to foreigners to build those resorts (Gill, 2019). The Maldives case demonstrates not only the tension between economic development and achieving blue economy goals but also the manner in which domestic governance is implicated in negotiating this tension.

This, of course, is a broader global public issue related to the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities”, first established at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UN, 1992). Overfishing, marine pollution and ocean governance have emerged as critical issues from this tension and relate to the nature of traditional and non-traditional security threats faced by states in the region (Singh, 2021). The next section considers the way these threats overlap and impact the realization of the blue economy goals.

### **Traditional and non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean region: Implications for the blue economy goals**

Conventionally, the primary differences between traditional and non-traditional security threats are the targets of the threat and the source of the threats. Direct military threats towards a state from another state is the most obvious example of a traditional security threat. Less obvious examples of traditional security threats involve diplomatic isolation and ideological competition between states. Traditional security threats are broadly state-centric, with states being the targets and sources of such threats. Non-traditional security threats comprise threats that do not target specific states but are transnational in nature and do not emanate completely or directly from a specific state. The effects of climate change, natural disasters, IUU fishing and maritime pollution are just some examples of non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain. However, the distinction between the two types of threats is not always clear, and there is some overlap in specific contexts. For many states, energy, food and water security, consisting of the ability to access both renewable and non-renewable energy sources as well as food and water sources, is increasingly a traditional security issue (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). In other cases, responses to non-traditional security threats become the site of interstate competition and rivalry, driven by wider interstate rivalries.

Within the region over the past decade, traditional security threats primarily emerged from India’s (and to a lesser extent the United States’) responses to China’s seemingly growing

military influence and footprint. For long periods during the Cold War, the Indian Ocean region was not a site of strategic competition, with Southeast Asia the main arena of strategic rivalry. In the early post-Cold War era, the broader East Asian region was the focus of strategic rivalry, with several maritime hotspots, especially the East and South China Seas, becoming sites of strategic rivalry between China, the United States and countries within East and Southeast Asia. The region began to garner increasing attention from the early 2000s, leading to Robert Kaplan's much discussed 2009 commentary in *Foreign Affairs*. He described the Indian Ocean region as the "center-stage" for "power plays" between leading states in the twenty-first century (Kaplan, 2009). His 2011 book described the region as the focus for the United States' global strategic outlook (Kaplan, 2011). A reason for the growing interest in the region as a focal point of strategic rivalry and the traditional security threats that emanate from it is China's growing military and economic presence as part of its westwards- strategy. The responses to the non-traditional security threats have been shaped by the perceptions about the nature of China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region, both militarily and economically. Certain states view China's increased presence in the region as an obstacle to achieving the blue economy goals, specifically in dealing with non-traditional security threats and largely because of the perception that China's actions in the non-traditional sphere increases the potential traditional security threat it poses for some states.

IUU fishing is a major non-traditional security threat for littoral states of the Indian Ocean region. Sustainable fishing is a crucial blue economy goal of the Jakarta Declaration as well as the earlier Mauritian Declaration, acknowledging the threat that IUU fishing poses for the livelihoods of coastal fishing communities as well as to ocean wildlife ecosystems. Foreign fishing vessels perpetrate the illegal fishing in exclusive economic zones or territorial seas of other states. In the region, there are several littoral states with large expanses of exclusive economic zones and territorial seas that they do not have the capacity to closely govern or monitor for illegal fishing. In these situations, states require jointly setting up regimes and processes to govern and monitor their adjoining exclusive economic zones and territorial seas. In certain cases, they may require assistance from outside the region or subregion, from international organizations, regional organizations or individual countries. A good example of this shared monitoring is the Extended Regional Coordination Unit of the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Plan, which is an initiative among eight countries in the Southwest Indian Ocean (comprising Comoros, France/La Reunion, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique,

Tanzania and Seychelles). With funding from the European Union, these countries have accomplished certain significant blue economy goals since 2007, specifically by reducing IUU fishing incidents by significantly improving the region's monitoring and surveillance capacity (Republic of Seychelles, 2021).

However, in other subregions, such mechanisms for states to jointly monitor as well as their surveillance capacity are underdeveloped. In addition to monitoring the contiguous exclusive economic zones and territorial seas of littoral states, there is also the issue of overfishing and illegal fishing of protected and endangered species in the high seas or international waters. Within the context of pursuing the blue economy goals, the overlap between traditional and non-traditional security threats is particularly apparent with such IUU activities. In the South China Sea, for instance, there is an increasing overlap between traditional threats, associated with maritime disputes and issues of sovereignty, and alleged intrusion by foreign fishing fleets in areas deemed to the exclusive economic zones and territorial seas of certain littoral states. The Philippines publicly claiming that Chinese fishing fleets are acting as a *de facto* maritime militia in disputed areas within the South China Sea is a case in point (Philippine Daily Inquirer and Asia News Network, 2021). There have been allegations of Chinese fishing trawlers fishing illegally in India's exclusive economic zone in the Bay of Bengal, with members of China's maritime militia aboard these trawlers in the guise of civilian fishermen (Kaushiki, 2021). In the Bay of Bengal the joint pursuit of blue economy goals in such instances, where traditional and non-traditional threats overlap, has become complicated. States are beginning to define solutions to the non-traditional security threats as zero-sum in nature and involve the use of military force and diplomatic pressure rather than jointly crafting and pursuing the blue economy goals to resolve those threats.

Beyond the territorial seas and the exclusive economic zones, unregulated fishing in the high seas of the Indian Ocean region remains a critical issue. Several regional fisheries management organizations have a range of contracting countries in relation to IUU fishing—and specifically unregulated fishing—in parts of those high seas. These include the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (created in 1996), the Commission for the Conservation of the Southern Bluefin Tuna (created in 1994) and the South Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (created in 2012). In addition, certain littoral states are also party to environmental treaties with a mandate to manage fisheries, which involve commitments to binding measures, such as the

Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (created in 1982). Despite the many organizations and conventions relating to unregulated fishing, there are several IUU regulatory gaps. One illustration is squid fishing in the Northwest Indian Ocean, covering an area of about 700,000 square kilometres and adjacent to the exclusive economic zones of Oman and Yemen. This area falls outside the geographical jurisdiction of the South Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement, rendering it beyond the regulation of any regional fisheries management organization or any other supranational body. The regulatory power of the flag state is the only applicable regulation for vessels in this area. Based on data collected by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, between 2015 and 2019, unregulated fishing in this area had grown significantly, with 20 per cent of vessels identified as Chinese-flagged vessels, 17 per cent as Panama-flagged vessels and the remainder flying a range of flags (WWF, 2022).

Although there are no maritime disputes in the region comparable to those in the South China Sea, there have been increasing overlaps in the perceptions of non-traditional and traditional security threats, specifically with IUU fishing. In addition to Chinese-flagged fishing vessels involved in the unregulated fishing of squid, Chinese vessels have also reportedly been illegally catching tuna in parts of the Indian Ocean, which already exhibits dangerous levels of overfishing (Associated Press, 2021). These reported incidents of IUU fishing are increasingly viewed as part of a wider range of traditional security threats emanating from China. In the IUU index developed by The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the Eastern Indian Ocean in 2019 was the worst region in terms of the prevalence of IUU fishing. And China ranked the worst both globally and in the East Indian Ocean for contributing towards prevalence of IUU fishing. Taiwan and Cambodia also fare poorly in the Asian region, while Panama and the Russian Federation were the other poor performers in adjacent regions (Macfadyen and others, 2019).

### **The reasons for these perceptions are twofold.**

First, there is a growing view that IUU fishing by Chinese-flagged vessels in the region is part of a broader response by China to the notion of a global rules-based order. In this view, China does not perceive rules and norms governing the maritime domain as legitimate and thus not binding. Several observers have drawn parallels between China's maritime claims and actions in the South and East China Seas, in contravention with its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Chinese-flagged

fishing vessels involved in IUU fishing are in contravention of obligations to various statutes related to IUU fishing (Sinclair, 2021). This has led to a growing view that even joint blue economy goals would be difficult to pursue within the context of China's approach towards its own obligations in relation to protecting marine ecosystems and seafood stocks within the Indian Ocean region. As a result, a non-traditional security issue, such as IUU fishing, is increasingly viewed as part of the broader range of traditional threats that China poses to states within the region and beyond (Sinclair, 2021). There is a perception that Chinese-flagged vessels are trying to satisfy increasing domestic demand for seafood to the detriment of the littoral states. These views are strengthened by the fact that Chinese "distant water" fishing vessels enjoy state subsidies and are among China's fisheries exports to third countries (Grare, 2021).

Second and similar to the perception of China deploying its flagged fishing vessels as part of its maritime militia in parts of the South China Sea, some littoral states view the activities of the Chinese fishing vessels with a great amount of suspicion. There are concerns that some crews include People Liberation Army Navy personnel and that these vessels are used for ocean reconnaissance for military intelligence purposes (Yong, 2021). These concerns stem from the belief that Chinese-flagged vessels are instruments of broader Chinese military goals in the Indian Ocean region. In such a context, it is clear to see how and why IUU fishing increasingly ceases to be a non-traditional security issue and instead becomes a clear national security threat to certain states. As a result, pursuing the blue economy goals, envisioned as joint multinational responses to transnational threats, becomes improbable. And responses to IUU fishing revert to addressing a security threat to one state directly from another.

### **Geopolitics and geoeconomics in the Indian Ocean region: Implications for the blue economy goals**

Geopolitics is the impact of geography on the conduct of relations among states, while geoeconomics has largely been applied in relation to geopolitics. Loosely, geopolitics is often shorthand for the use of military means to achieve certain goals by states within international politics. As a concept, geoeconomics began to be discussed more broadly around the end of the Cold War, signalling the rising importance of economic tools rather than purely military means in the pursuit of individual states' national interests. In essence, geoeconomics is the "use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests and to produce beneficial

geopolitical results” (Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 9).

In recent years, countries have preferred to utilize economic instruments rather than military means to safeguard and advance their national interests. One example is India, which increasingly views geoeconomics as a more useful tool than geopolitics as a means of advancing its interests. To a large extent, Indian strategies have been shaped by perceptions of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, specifically its Maritime Silk Road in the Indian Ocean region.

In 2015, India announced its blue economy vision, the Sagarmala Project for port-led coastal economic development within its borders. It encompasses four areas – port modernization, port connectivity, port-led industrialization and coastal community development (Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, 2022). It looks to harness India’s 7,517 kilometres of coastline and an exclusive economic zone of 2.02 million square kilometres, positioning India as a hub for regional maritime connectivity in the Bay of Bengal. In many ways, it is an attempt to provide viable options to China’s Belt and Road projects in the Bay of Bengal, which India views as part of China’s attempt to leverage economic opportunities it provides to countries in that region for broader strategic purposes (Singh and Chaudhary, 2022). India’s Sagarmala project also feeds into India’s broader vision for the Indian Ocean region: Security and Growth for All in the Region, or SAGAR, which Prime Minister Modi announced in 2014 on his first international visits to the Indian Ocean littoral states of Maldives, Seychelles and Sri Lanka.

In the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh occupies a key place in India’s attempts to provide littoral states in this sub-region with alternatives to the BRI. Bangladesh, however, has been careful to balance relations between India and China, in both geoeconomics and geopolitics domains. Bangladesh has formally joined the BRI while also agreeing, in 2019, for transshipment of goods from India’s north-east via Bangladesh’s ports without charging customs duties and transit fee (Pattanaik, 2019). This tendency also informs Bangladesh’s approach to Blue Economy co-operation with India and China, with important implications for India’s approach towards providing alternatives to the BRI in the Bay of Bengal. Since 2015, Bangladesh has signed Blue Economy agreements with India and then China, ranging from oceanographic surveys to assess fisheries stocks in its exclusive economic zones with India as well as research on coastal resource exploitation and coastal industries with China (Mannan et al., 2020). From an Indian perspective, Bangladesh will remain central to Indian

blue economy diplomacy as Bangladesh seeks to preserve its autonomy via balancing its blue economy engagements with India and China.

SAGAR’s aims are multifaceted, ranging from enhanced connectivity to assisting island states to deal with non-traditional threats, such as climate change. In the process it also aims to increase India’s economic and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region. One of India’s successes as part of its SAGAR vision has been its “first responder” role in dealing with non-traditional threats faced by littoral states in the region, specifically for humanitarian and disaster relief operations. In the aftermath of cyclones in Madagascar (2019) and Mozambique (2020), the Indian Navy provided disaster relief via provision of food stores and drinking water as well as medical supplies and treatment to the affected coastal communities. This notion of India as a trustworthy provider of public goods in the non-traditional sphere within the region is an objective of its SAGAR vision.

India has also attempted to provide capacity for anti-piracy operations. Piracy is a significant blue economy issue in the region, with many of the world’s major piracy hotspots located within its waters affecting the flow of commercial shipping and energy supplies and thus the economic well-being of countries. India has been an active member of the international task force on anti-piracy operations in the Straits of Hormuz and remains a partner of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia. In this domain, India’s response is again significantly driven by China’s attempts to provide capacity to anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean region. But it has been dogged by various controversies, such as China’s use of submarines to seemingly conduct anti-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden (Chung, 2015).

More recently, India asserted its willingness to engage in the multinational anti-piracy patrols in the Straits of Malacca. India’s eagerness to contribute to the regional blue economy goals is part of its attempt to leverage its geoeconomics role into a more visible greater strategic presence in the Eastern and Western Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2022). The dominant view within Indian official circles is that China’s Maritime Silk Road is driven as much by geopolitics as it is by geoeconomics. For many observers, the perceived overlap between geopolitics and geoeconomics in China’s Maritime Silk Road has significantly hindered the accomplishment of the blue economy goals in the region.

Joint development via the construction of new ports and other

facilities by China is increasingly regarded as economically unviable (at least in the short to medium run), and the takeover of these economically distressed projects by China's state-owned enterprises has raised concerns about its ability to translate such ownership into constraining the geopolitical choices of recipient states. This has led to countries, such as India, increasingly viewing port development projects not as part of the larger blue economy development goals for communities within the region but instead as part of a wider geopolitical contest with China. India's Chabahar port project in the Islamic Republic of Iran is widely viewed as its desire to push back against perceived Chinese geopolitical expansion via the port development projects.

China's pledge to sustainability commitments contained within its Maritime Silk Road vision blueprint is increasingly questioned within the context of its various infrastructural projects in the Indian Ocean region. For example, while China's infrastructural development projects have filled the demand in the African littoral states for much-needed development of local communities, reports of these communities being displaced and environmental safeguards overlooked in the projects continue to surface. Such reports solidify Indian perceptions of China's lack of actual commitment to win-win blue economy goals. China's practice of geoeconomics, in this view, is a zero-sum form of geopolitics in the Indian Ocean region and thus does not yield the required confidence in China's assurances towards jointly fulfilling the blue economy goals.

## Scenarios

The blue economy goals face a range of challenges, specifically in contexts where the perceptions of traditional and non-traditional threats overlap. These overlaps also feed into assessments about the intention of states and their strategies. This section builds on the earlier observations to sketch both worst-case and the best-case near-term scenarios for the prospects of the blue economy goals in the Indian Ocean region.

The best-case scenario involves subregional cooperation, with littoral states jointly pursuing the blue economy goals to address various non-traditional security threats: This involves states in the Western Indian Ocean region offering extraregional support to build up capacities towards achieving the goals. Existing institutions and processes, such as the Indian Ocean Commission, the Extended Regional Coordination Unit and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia in the Western Indian Ocean, provide good foundations for joint action by littoral states with external support for capacity-

building. France's role in building up capacities to achieve the blue economy goals within this subregion has been important, given the location of Reunion within the Western Indian Ocean as well as France being a member of the European Union. Littoral states in this subregion are likely to continue taking concrete action against IUU fishing and piracy as well as protecting marine diversity, specifically coral reefs, with help from the European Union as well as specific member States, such as France and Germany (IOC, 2017). The European Union's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, adopted by the European Union Council in 2021, outlines commitment to seven priority areas. Several of them aim to support the blue economy goals, such as sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition and ocean governance (European Union, 2021). The European Union's commitment to building up capacities in the littoral states will broaden the ability to realize certain blue economy goals, specifically in the Western Indian Ocean region. While the multinational anti-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden at one point seemed to resemble a site of geopolitical contest between China and India, the decreasing number of pirate attacks off Somalia has reduced the need for anti-piracy operations.

The worst-case scenario reflects certain trends, specifically in the Eastern Indian Ocean subregion: The continuing securitization of non-traditional security threats by India in response to perceived growing Chinese presence in the Eastern Indian Ocean subregion leads to heightened geopolitical contests between those two countries. There is a growing lack of trust to jointly pursue the blue economy goals, given India's increasing tendency to securitize infrastructural projects under the Belt and Road Initiative in the region. India's recent moves to propose defence cooperation as part of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation speaks to this tendency. India views China's professed commitment to the economic development of littoral states in the subregion, as well as China's commitment to the blue economy goals, as geopolitical moves meant to bolster its strategic presence in the Eastern Indian Ocean subregion.

The rising levels of bilateral tensions between India and China on their border will increase the likelihood the worst-case scenario, especially in the context of deteriorating United States–China relations. India will increasingly pressure littoral states in the subregion to demonstrate greater sympathy for Indian sensitivities in terms of China's infrastructural development plans in the subregion. In effect, the subregion will begin to demonstrate patterns similar to the global Cold War, with India and China engaged in increased geopolitical rivalry across different domains, including non-traditional

and blue economy issues. Such a geopolitical bifurcation of the Eastern Indian Ocean subregion will lead to increased tensions in the maritime domain and raise the chances of open maritime clashes between India and China. This will have detrimental effects for the whole region in achieving the blue economy goals, especially with India and China not able to

work together even on non-traditional issues. It is thus difficult to envisage the possibility of win-win outcomes driving India–China cooperation in pursuit of the blue economy goals in the region, specifically in the Eastern Indian Ocean subregion.

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