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Frédéric Grare, Jean-Loup Samaan, *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region*

[Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022,
xii + 232 pp.]

The book *The Indian Ocean as a New Political and Security Region* has only recently been published by Palgrave Macmillan, which means that it will offer readers the most current perspective on the topics that have been subjected to scrutiny.

The book has been co-authored. The first author is Frédéric Grare, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Paris, where he works on Indo-Pacific issues; and Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where his research focusses on Indo-Pacific dynamics, the search for a security architecture and South Asia Security issues. Grare has a wealth of expertise in the topic thanks to his professional experience at the French embassy in Pakistan, where he served as Director of the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in New Delhi, as Advisor at the Centre for Analysis, forecasting and strategy of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and as Head of the Asia bureau at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs in the French Ministry of Defence. The other author is Jean-Loup Samaan, Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore, and

Associate Research Fellow at the French Institute of International Relations, and Adjunct Lecturer at Yale-NUS College. His research focusses on Middle Eastern strategic affairs – in particular the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, and the evolution of the Gulf security system. His professional experience includes the position of policy analyst at the Directorate for Strategic Affairs in the French Ministry of Defence (2008–2011), research advisor at the NATO Defence College (2011–2016), and associate professor in strategic studies detached by the US Near East South Asia Centre to the UAE National Defence College (2016–2021).

Both authors have released several books and other publications on related topics of their interest. Given such profound background of the authors, readers can count on highly informative and skilled research presented in the book, which consists of nine chapters. The first chapter is the Introduction, which is followed by the authors' suggestion to delve deeper into the discourse, as they start with a chapter that looks at China's Indian Ocean strategy. What follows is a shift to India's interests, to the role of the US and Europe in the region, and finally to the engagement of Arab countries, Australia, ASEAN countries, and Africa. Finally, the last chapter offers a summary of the comprehensive overview of the regional issues discussed, and the region's relations with other regions and world powers. The book has 240 pages. Each part has been neatly structured to include an introduction, a main part with the relevant subtopics, a conclusion, and a detailed list of bibliographical references.

The resources used for the research are numerous and diverse, and they include monographs, internet resources, thinktanks' releases, a wide array of documents and reports, and other materials. Such diversity guarantees the objectivity of the authors and shows their comprehensive approach to the research done. There are no illustrations in the book, which could be regarded as a drawback, as some maps would have been useful to back up the analysis of the geopolitical regions and help readers to gain better insight into the topics at hand.

Chapter 5, titled "The UK and France: An European Struggle for Regional Influence", expands on the topic of European engagement to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and explains the strategies of the UK and France in terms of military presence and diplomatic efforts. The common feature and trend of the foreign policies of these countries during the last decade is the return to the Indian Ocean region despite their withdrawal before the 2010s, regarded as a relic of the colonial era. Nowadays, both countries are trying to play the role as external powers in the region and gain influence in the local governance. France has a number of overseas territories there, which is why it has a military and naval potential in coastal Africa, and some islands, like Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, as well as the tiny French sub-Antarctic and Antarctic Territories (Crozet Islands, Kerguelen Islands, Amsterdam and Saint-Paul Islands). In 2012 Admiral Dufourcq, back then

an influential voice within the French naval circles, argued that “the Indian Ocean presents two major focal points of military interests for France. The first goes from Djibouti to the Persian Gulf. The second is the region of Mascareignes, a region of the south Indian Ocean.” When it comes to the diplomatic approach, France preferred to build its relations with India, a former British colony, with whom the British have not managed to build diplomatic bridges despite the huge Indian diaspora in the UK. Moreover, observers say that French and Indian foreign policies are very similar, as they both rely on the axiom of strategic autonomy – the desire to avoid systematic alignment on US policies in terms of national defence. France also made attempts at engaging Australia into the first Paris-Delhi-Canberra trilateral dialogue in 2020, articulated as an official Indo-Pacific strategy through diplomatic and military measures, thus in sharp opposition to China’s maritime ambitions. Nevertheless, France’s position is still very vague and somewhat poorly articulated, as France supported EU-China trade agreement in December 2020, contrary to its previously made statements in this matter.

The UK’s territories in the IOR are not that numerous and only include the Chagos archipelago, where they do not have a formal military representation. Moreover, the British control over the archipelago has been disputed for a while by Mauritius, but not successfully, as the UK and the US military presence has remained unchanged there. Still, the UK’s main strategic goal in the region is the strong impact of local crises on the stability of maritime commerce, as maritime trade is one of the key sectors of the British economy. In terms of diplomacy, the UK previously saw China as its main partner, which contributed to the lack of trust in UK-India relations, especially taking into account their colonial past. However, as soon as Boris Johnson took office as Prime Minister, this sector of UK politics changed dramatically, as the 2021 Integrated Review evidenced the British shift on China in comparison with the previous document of 2015. The designation of China as a *partner* was replaced by a new label attached to the country – this time naming it *a systemic competitor*. Nevertheless, when it comes to the cultural influence, the UK can still boast an undisputed prevalence in the IOR, this includes the English language, and the presence of offices of the British Council, British media (the BBC), and the attractiveness of British schools – in fact, many political leaders and influential elites of the region have completed their education at British universities or their branches, which are numerous in the IOR. This proximity of decision makers of the region gives the UK an exclusive funding capability, the authority of schooling local military staff, coupled with the influence on strategic thinkers through organisations like the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Also, one should not forget the Commonwealth, which is a powerful tool, although apparently the UK has not been taking advantage of it too much.

Chapter 7 “Australia and the ASEAN Member States: From Interest to Commitment?” underscores the fact that these countries control all the choke points between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and that is why they are extremely sensitive to all the developments and changes there. These changes are mainly happening because of the China-US confrontation, especially China’s ambitions to go beyond the Pacific and its aggressive attitude in the South China Sea, and also because of its willingness to project power beyond the Malacca Strait. Because of this, Australia and the ASEAN states have begun to reassess their involvement in the IOR, as they have started to see it as a source of real insecurity, and a cause for major concern. As a result, the region is witnessing a transition to the emergence of multilateral arrangements in the Indian Ocean: the ASEAN states have gradually reinforced their own coordination, in the Malacca Strait in particular, in order to prevent the need for great powers’ interventions, while Australia has, in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, helped to enhance their capacity. At the same time, all the countries around the eastern Indian Ocean have developed naval ties with India.

This development of intra-Asian security networking could imply a drift of Eastern Indian Ocean countries into the India-China rivalry, as most of the new formats have emerged as a result of growing tensions between China and Australia on the one side, between China and ASEAN member states, while border tensions between India and China soon translated into lethal confrontations. Finally, East Asian countries are simply aiming at protecting themselves from the global US-China rivalry, and the regional China-India rivalry, as its consequences could be destructive for all.

Overall, the trend remains epitomised by permanent tensions between the unity and the fragmentation of the IOR, the area no longer being perceived as a mere gateway between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. We can be sure that the security vacuum is not possible there due to China’s rise, and the fact that the US, European, Asian or Middle Eastern countries have all increased their presence. The rise of China has also changed the nature of the strategic landscape – the focus is no longer exclusively on naval predominance, but it has been extended to include comprehensive maritime security, where the need to address predatory practices goes hand in hand with the need to manage the growing militarisation of the region.

On the whole, the book is undoubtedly a valuable source of detailed and credible research of the Indian Ocean Region, a topic that has not been given enough academic attention thus far. This is why, it is a useful and instructive source of knowledge for students of International Relations, and for those who wish to understand the ins and outs of this particular region. The issues discussed have been scrutinised from various angles, and the authors have provided the readers with a comprehensive analysis of not only the local geopolitical infrastructure, but also the relations of the region with other political actors, regions, and associations. The book looks

at several key faces of the issues – economic, military, cultural, geographical, historical, and others. Surely, it is an interesting source of information for those who have already studied the topic, but it also encourages others, less acquainted with the issues, to know more. With all this in mind, it is fair to say that the book is a truly informative publication that makes a major contribution to the current base of studies and other research materials available on the Polish publishing market.

