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Shared Waters, Shared Interests: Blue Economy Cooperation between India and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The "blue economy," understood broadly as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, livelihoods and ecosystem health, has become a defining vocabulary through which Indian Ocean states articulate their maritime futures. India and South Africa, the two largest economies bordering the western Indian Ocean and founding members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), have each adopted ambitious national blue economy programmes, respectively Sagarmala and the Deep Ocean Mission on the Indian side, and Operation Phakisa on the South African side, and have increasingly framed their bilateral and minilateral engagement (through IORA, IBSA and BRICS) in blue economy terms. Yet the academic literature on IndiaSouth Africa relations remains dominated by trade, diaspora and multilateral diplomacy, and has not systematically examined blue economy cooperation as a distinct and increasingly consequential domain of the relationship. This paper addresses that gap. It asks two questions: what forms does blue economy cooperation between India and South Africa currently take, and what theoretical account best explains both the momentum behind, and the limits of, this cooperation. Drawing on a qualitative documentary and policy analysis of official statements, bilateral agreements and multilateral frameworks, and situating the empirical material within a theoretical framework that combines liberal institutionalist regime theory with critical "blue economy discourse" analysis, the paper argues that India-South Africa maritime cooperation is best understood as an emerging, institutionally thin regime, one driven by converging strategic and developmental interests but constrained by capacity asymmetries, competing blue economy discourses, and the wider geopolitical contest for influence in the western Indian Ocean. The paper concludes that deepening this cooperation will require moving from declaratory convergence toward institutionalised, resourced mechanisms of implementation.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian Ocean has re-emerged, over the past decade and a half, as one of the world's most consequential maritime spaces: a conduit for roughly two-thirds of global oil shipments and a third of bulk cargo traffic, a theatre of intensifying strategic competition, and, increasingly, a site in which littoral and rim states are attempting to articulate a shared economic vocabulary for the ocean itself. That vocabulary has crystallised around the idea of the "blue economy," a term that entered mainstream policy discourse following the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) and has since been adopted, with varying emphases, by governments, regional organisations and development institutions across the Indian Ocean rim (Voyer, Quirk, McIlgorm & Azmi, 2018). In the case of India and South Africa, the two largest and most institutionally advanced economies of the western Indian Ocean basin, the blue economy has moved beyond being merely an internal policy tag. Rather, it has started to define how the two states perceive each other within the context of their joint membership in regional institutions.

This alignment is no coincidence either. India started its own national blue economy strategies seriously through its port-led development program named 'Sagarmala' (2015) and its latest deep ocean mission (2021), in addition to its regional maritime strategy through its "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) doctrine in 2015. On the other hand, South Africa came up with "Operation Phakisa: Oceans Economy" in 2014, which was basically a big-fast-results project that sought to tap the economic possibilities of the oceans in South Africa in terms of shipping, aquaculture, offshore oil and gas and marine protection services (South African Government, 2014).. Both countries are founding members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the principal regional organisation for Indian Ocean cooperation, within which blue economy governance has become a central pillar since South Africa's 2017 chairmanship placed the theme at the top of the association's agenda. Both are also members of the IBSA Dialogue Forum (India-Brazil-South Africa) and of BRICS, minilateral groupings that have periodically addressed maritime and ocean governance issues, and both share a broader historical relationship rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, the Non-Aligned Movement, and post-apartheid diplomatic partnership.

Despite this apparent convergence, the significance of blue economy cooperation between India and South Africa has received surprisingly little sustained academic attention. The literature on India-South Africa relations remains dominated by studies of trade and investment flows, diaspora politics, and the two countries' roles in multilateral fora such as the G20, BRICS and the World Trade Organization (see, for example, Taylor, 2018; Sidiropoulos, 2019). Where the blue economy is mentioned in reference to the Indian Ocean, the literature either tends to deal with India's bilateral relations with smaller island nations like Mauritius and Seychelles in which India's interests come into play, or tends to explore the blue economy as an abstract concept without taking into account how the blue economy works in terms of a specific bilateral relationship between India and South Africa. This paper will fill this lacuna. It poses two linked questions to begin with: What are the tangible manifestations of blue economy cooperation between India and South Africa in bilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral formats? And what theoretical perspective will be able to explain the drivers and limitations of this cooperation?

The main claim of the paper is that India-South Africa blue economy cooperation should be viewed as a nascent and institutionally weak regime, which means that there is a set of commonly held norms and declarative commitments as well as intersecting national programs which have yet to evolve into a matured institutional framework. This cooperation is driven by a genuine convergence of interest, both countries face similar developmental pressures to diversify their economies through ocean-based industries, and both share a strategic interest in a stable, multipolar Indian Ocean order that is not dominated by any single external power. At the same time, the cooperation is constrained by significant asymmetries in maritime capacity and financing, by the co-existence of quite different blue economy discourses within each country's own policy establishment, and by the wider geopolitical contest, most visibly involving China's growing footprint in the western Indian Ocean, within which both India and South Africa must position themselves.

The paper proceeds in five further sections. Section two reviews the relevant literature on the blue economy as a concept and discourse, on India-South Africa relations, and on the theoretical frameworks, principally liberal institutionalist regime theory, used to analyse maritime cooperation. Section three outlines the documentary approach employed in the study. Section four provides an empirical analysis of India-South Africa cooperation in the blue economy from an institutional architecture and content perspective. Section five analyzes the results in light of the theoretical framework developed earlier. Finally, section six draws the conclusion and suggests further research.

Literature Review

This part of the literature review looks at three different strands of literature related to the questions posed by this paper. The first strand is the literature on blue economy as an idea and discourse.The second strand is the literature on India-South Africa relationship and Indian Ocean regionalism.

The Blue Economy: Concept and Contested Discourse

What a blue economy is, however, is not necessarily straightforward, because the very conceptual fuzziness surrounding the notion is itself a topic worthy of academic inquiry. Silver, Gray, Campbell, Fairbanks and Gruby (2015) contend that the blue economy should be seen less as a coherent policy agenda and more as a space of discursive contest where, at minimum, there are four competing framings of what it is: oceans as the source of national development and of “natural capital”; oceans as an environment for small-scale fisheries and coastal communities where the issue of equity becomes central; oceans as the setting for ecosystem protection and “natural capital accounting”; and oceans as the field for sound governance and multilateral cooperation. Voyer, Quirk, McIlgorm and Azmi (2018) explore this idea further by demonstrating empirically that different states and institutions selectively highlight certain framings based on their domestic political economies, where resource-abundant developing nations tend to prioritize growth and industrialization, while donor organizations and small island nations focus on sustainability and equity issues. Winder and Le Heron (2017) describe the blue economy as an “assemblage,” a loosely coupled set of policy instruments, institutions and narratives that different actors mobilise for varying, sometimes contradictory, purposes, a framing this paper finds useful in analysing how India and South Africa each deploy blue economy language for somewhat different domestic and strategic ends even as they converge in bilateral rhetoric.

For the Indian Ocean region specifically, Attri and Bohler-Muller (2018) provide the most comprehensive edited treatment, bringing together country case studies, including both India and South Africa, that document the blue economy's rise as a regional policy agenda within IORA. Doyle (2018) situates this rise within a broader account of Indian Ocean regionalism, arguing that the blue economy agenda has functioned as a relatively depoliticised entry point around which IORA member states with otherwise divergent strategic interests, including India, South Africa, Australia and the Gulf states, have found it possible to cooperate, precisely because the blue economy framing emphasises shared developmental interest over contested security concerns.

India-South Africa Relations and Indian Ocean Regionalism

India-South Africa relations have traditionally been studied in terms of solidarity in their struggle against colonialism and apartheid, cooperation after the end of apartheid in diplomatic relations, and in terms of their involvement in the structures of South-South cooperation such as IBSA and BRICS (Sidiropoulos, 2019; Taylor, 2018).According to Sidiropoulos (2019), South Africa’s foreign policy since 1994 saw India as an important partner in its efforts to diversify its international relations, which were not focused solely on the West, and according to Taylor (2018), these relations were seen in the context of BRICS cooperation and South-South economic diplomacy, where it is highlighted that economic cooperation is still modest compared to the other economic relations of both countries. None of the studies examines the issue of ocean governance and blue economy cooperation. From a maritime perspective, Mohan (2012) provides an authoritative discussion of India’s developing strategy for the Indian Ocean, which asserts that India has shifted from a fairly passive, continent-oriented foreign policy to a more assertive maritime policy designed to secure its role as the principal security guarantor of the northern and western Indian Ocean, further enshrined institutionally through the SAGAR doctrine. Bouchard and Crumplin (2010), as well as later writings on geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, illustrate how the growth of strategic competition in the region is linked to Chinese investment and construction of ports and infrastructure in the region through its Maritime Silk Road project, seen by various researchers as one of the crucial yet implicit drivers of cooperation between the IORA members that seek to maintain a multipolar regional order (Doyle, 2018). The Indian Ocean policy of South Africa itself is not as well researched, except for Operation Phakisa, which has been studied by certain policy-related sources that look into its implementation and failure to meet the goals set out (Findlay, 2018). Bouchard and Crumplin (2010) place the increase of assertiveness of both countries' maritime policies in the broader context of Indian Ocean's geopolitical history by asserting that the relative neglect of the Indian Ocean in geopolitical affairs throughout most of the twentieth century has changed since early 2000s when great and middle powers began to show increased interest in the region due to energy security and trade routes and competition over investment in infrastructure along the coastline.

Theoretical Frameworks: Regime Theory and Institutionalism

To analyse the drivers and limits of India-South Africa blue economy cooperation, this paper draws on liberal institutionalist regime theory, particularly the classic formulations of Krasner (1982) and Keohane (1984). Krasner (1982) defines international regimes as sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area, a definition broad enough to encompass loosely institutionalised cooperation as well as fully codified treaty regimes. Keohane (1984) argues that such regimes emerge and persist because they reduce transaction costs, provide information, and create the conditions for reciprocity among self-interested states that would otherwise struggle to cooperate absent a hegemonic enforcer, an argument particularly relevant to a regional order such as the Indian Ocean rim, which lacks a single dominant power capable of imposing cooperation unilaterally.

This regime-theoretic lens is complemented by the critical discourse literature discussed above, because a purely interest-based account of regime formation risks treating the blue economy as a neutral label for underlying material interests, when in fact, as Silver et al. (2015) and Winder and Le Heron (2017) demonstrate, the specific framing of the blue economy shapes which interests are recognised as legitimate and which actors are positioned as central or peripheral to cooperation. Combining these two literatures allows the paper to ask not only whether India and South Africa have converging interests sufficient to sustain cooperation, the regime-theoretic question, but also which version of the blue economy that cooperation is actually being built around, and for whom, the discourse-analytic question.

The Gap Addressed by This Paper

Read together, these literatures leave a clear gap. The blue economy literature is well developed conceptually but has not been applied in a sustained way to the specific bilateral relationship between India and South Africa. The India-South Africa relations literature is well developed on trade, diaspora and multilateral diplomacy but has largely overlooked ocean governance and blue economy cooperation as a distinct domain. And while regime theory and discourse analysis have each been applied separately to Indian Ocean regionalism in general terms, neither has been used to analyse the specific institutional architecture, substantive content and limits of India-South Africa maritime cooperation. This paper addresses that gap.

Methodology

This research paper employs the methodology of qualitative documentary and policy analysis, which is suitable for the task of charting and theorizing on an emerging field of bilateral and multilateral collaboration instead of hypothesis testing using quantifiable evidence. The analysis relies on three sources of primary data. The first source comprises of official policy documents such as those of India's Sagarmala program documents, SAGAR Doctrine Statements, and Deep Ocean Mission policy framework from India's side and the Operation Phakisa Oceans Economy from South Africa's side. These sources were accessed via government publications. When quoted directly, these sources were cited using paraphrases.

The second is multilateral and minilateral documentation, principally IORA declarations and communiqués relevant to the blue economy, including outcomes from South Africa's 2017 IORA chairmanship, and relevant IBSA and BRICS joint statements touching on maritime or ocean governance cooperation. The third is bilateral documentation, including joint statements and memoranda arising from India-South Africa summit-level and ministerial engagement where these bear on maritime, fisheries or ocean economy cooperation. This primary material is read alongside, and interpreted through, the secondary academic literature reviewed above, particularly the regime-theoretic and blue economy discourse frameworks that structure the paper's analytical section. The method is therefore interpretive rather than purely descriptive: the paper does not merely catalogue instances of cooperation but asks what pattern of institutionalisation, convergence and constraint they reveal when read against the theoretical expectations generated by regime theory, and what version, or versions, of the blue economy discourse each initiative reflects. There are two aspects about this methodology that need to be addressed. First, as a qualitative document analysis, this article does not provide a quantitative analysis of the economic value of cooperation of the blue economy, in terms of volume of trade or investments in ocean- related sectors for example, a work that needs another methodology. Second, this article is based on documentation that has been made public and does not include interview evidence from officials who have played a part in the relationship, something that could have given a more detailed insight into the problems of implementation of the blue economy cooperation. This article's assertions must therefore be taken as such – an interpretative mapping and theoretical evaluation of the public structure of the relationship.

Mapping India-South Africa Blue Economy Cooperation

This section presents the paper's empirical analysis, organised around three levels at which IndiaSouth Africa blue economy cooperation takes place: the multilateral level (principally IORA), the minilateral level (IBSA and BRICS), and the bilateral level, before examining the substantive sectoral areas in which cooperation has been most concretely articulated.

The Multilateral Foundation: IORA and Regional Blue Economy Governance

The Indian Ocean Rim Association, established in 1997 and comprising 23 member states along the Indian Ocean littoral, provides the principal multilateral framework within which India and South Africa's blue economy interests intersect institutionally. Both countries were founding members, and both have held the organisation's rotating chairmanship, India from 1997 to 1999 and again from 2011 to 2013, and South Africa from 2017 to 2019. The chairmanship of South Africa was of particular importance for the blue economy issue since it put the theme in the focus of IORA's work programme culminating in the 2017 IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta that was co-hosted by Indonesia. The summit adopted the Declaration that explicitly committed member states to cooperate more on sustainable development of ocean-based economies (Attri & Bohler-Muller, 2018). In turn, India has been able to promote the SAGAR doctrine's idea about maritime security, capacity building and disaster relief as parallel pillars to the blue economy through its membership in IORA (Mohan, 2012).

Such a convergence within the forum cannot be exaggerated. IORA operates on a basis of consensus of 23 member states with a broad range of economic capabilities and strategic interests, ranging from small island nations like the Comoros and Seychelles to larger regional players like India, Indonesia and Australia, and with an institutional structure comprising a small secretariat in Mauritius with a modest budget, IORA finds itself constrained in taking steps beyond declaratory cooperation towards actual joint programs (Doyle, 2018) India-South Africa cooperation within IORA is therefore better characterised as parallel advocacy for compatible blue economy priorities within a weak institutional shell, rather than as a fully realised joint programme.

Minilateral Channels: IBSA and BRICS

Beyond IORA, India and South Africa's shared membership in the IBSA Dialogue Forum and BRICS provides additional, though similarly under-institutionalised, channels for blue economy engagement. IBSA, bringing together India, Brazil and South Africa as three major democracies of the Global South, has periodically addressed maritime cooperation through its trilateral naval exercise, IBSAMAR, first held in 2008 and repeated at intervals since, which, while primarily a security and interoperability exercise, has been explicitly linked by participating governments to the broader goal of protecting shared maritime economic interests, including freedom of navigation and resource security in the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean (Government of South Africa, 2014; see also Taylor, 2018). BRICS, meanwhile, has addressed ocean and maritime issues intermittently within its broader economic cooperation agenda, including references to blue economy cooperation in summit declarations, though these have generally remained aspirational rather than programmatic, reflecting BRICS's broader character as a forum oriented toward macroeconomic and governance reform coordination rather than sector-specific implementation. Taken together, the minilateral channels available to India and South Africa supplement, without substantially deepening, the multilateral cooperation available through IORA. Their principal value, on the evidence reviewed here, lies less in generating concrete joint blue economy projects than in reinforcing a shared diplomatic narrative, one in which both countries position themselves as responsible maritime powers advancing a rules-based, multipolar Indian Ocean order.

Capacity Asymmetries and Structural Constraints

There are certain structural limitations that can be cited in order to understand why such a level of cooperation, which is institutionally very thin, is not being strengthened in spite of normative convergence.The first limitation is a very simple one of maritime capacity and financing. India has one of the largest navies and coast guards, it has a large shipbuilding industry as well as the ability to invest in massive infrastructure projects like Sagarmala which entails investments across five hundred plus projects related to ports modernization, port connectivity and coastal economic zones. The maritime capability of South Africa is considerable in terms of the standards of Africa but is much smaller in terms of scale and Operation Phakisa has been limited by the overall financial constraints being faced by the South African state in the past ten years or so. (Findlay, 2018). This asymmetry means that bilateral cooperation, however normatively balanced in its official framing, tends in practice to involve India as the larger provider of technical assistance, training opportunities and, potentially, investment capital, and South Africa as a comparatively resource-constrained partner, a dynamic that is not unique to this relationship but that nonetheless shapes what forms of cooperation are practically achievable in the near term.

A second constraint concerns bureaucratic and institutional capacity for follow-through. Both Sagarmala and Operation Phakisa were launched with ambitious, centrally driven implementation architectures, in India's case anchored in the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, and in South Africa's case in an inter-ministerial delivery unit modelled on Malaysia's “big fast results” methodology. Independent assessments of Operation Phakisa's first five years found substantial gaps between announced investment targets and realised outcomes, attributed in part to coordination difficulties across the many government departments with a stake in ocean governance (Findlay, 2018). Similarly, the coordination challenges associated with Sagarmala arise from the fact that the implementation of the initiative is shared between the central and state governments on one hand and port authorities and private developers on the other. This is significant to the bilateral relationship because it means neither government has the time to devote to developing blue economy initiatives beyond dialogue. The third constraint, alluded to above in passing, relates to the competitive external environment within which the ocean economy strategies of both countries are set. The investments made by China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road have grown substantially over the last decade in the western Indian Ocean and along the African coastline, and provide a competing source of infrastructure partnerships, often with far greater funding backing, to those that India and South Africa are attempting to build through their respective partnerships. While this can be seen to enhance the strategic rationale for India-South Africa cooperation as will be outlined below, it simultaneously places a limit on it, in that the more capital- constrained regional partners of both countries may have greater incentive to take up external investment than engage in their more lengthy and consultative process of cooperation.

Bilateral Engagement and Sectoral Cooperation

The cooperation in blue economy at the bilateral level between India and South Africa has been expressed in joint statements made as a result of high-level visits, where cooperation in the field of fisheries, scientific research in the ocean and maritime domain awareness has been mentioned as areas of collaboration. Specifically, this was realized in terms of some projects: cooperation in the field of hydrographic surveys and scientific research, cooperation between the navies of both states in the field of maritime domain awareness in the western Indian Ocean, and regular consultations among experts on issues related to fisheries management, which is especially significant due to both states' interest in fighting against IUU fishing in the exclusive economic zone (Attri & Bohler -Muller, 2018).

India's Sagarmala project and Deep Ocean mission, although largely domestic infrastructure and research programs, have also presented opportunities for bilateral cooperation, for example, India's interest in South Africa's expertise in deep sea mining and port management due to South Africa's role as the operator of some of the most congested container ports in Africa. For its part, South Africa's Operation Phakisa has considered India as a possible source of investments and partnerships in projects related to small port development and marine manufacturing, although the level of actual investments in these sectors is fairly low considering the stated goals of the operation, as has been reported in the independent review of Operation Phakisa's progress (Findlay, 2018).

Another area, which is becoming more and more important, is the bilateral cooperation related to maritime security in a narrow sense, meaning sharing of information about non-traditional security issues such as piracy, drug trafficking, and IUU fishing in the western Indian Ocean. In spite of the fact that the issue of maritime security is analytically different from the blue economy, the connection made by the SAGAR doctrine between security and economic cooperation, as well as Operation Phakisa itself, which acknowledges the necessity of securing the maritime environment for developing the ocean economy, makes it possible to say that in practice they are viewed by both countries as complementary to each other.

Discussion: An Emerging but Institutionally Thin Regime

Looking at the regime theory model presented above, from the empirical perspective provided in the previous section, one can deduce that there are many but not all elements of an international regime, as described by Krasner (1982) and Keohane (1984), present in blue economy collaboration between India and South Africa. First of all, there is a convergence of norms, as both nations' documents clearly outline that the ocean constitutes a legitimate arena for economic growth, that maritime security is connected to this growth, and that collaboration between the two countries in the maritime space contributes to their common interests in establishing a multipolar, nonhegemonic Indian Ocean Order. Moreover, there is a convergence of norms because both states share membership in three institutional arenas of overlapping scope: IORA, IBSA, and BRICS.

The development of rules and procedures which regime theory suggests should be there for the cooperation process to go from declarative agreement to reliable collaboration is comparatively deficient, however. IORA's consensus-based, low-capacity institutional structure limits its ability to generate binding commitments or resourced joint programmes; IBSA and BRICS supplement this with periodic high-level attention but no dedicated implementation architecture specific to the blue economy; and bilateral cooperation, while real, remains concentrated in a relatively narrow set of technical exchanges and dialogue mechanisms rather than large-scale joint investment or regulatory harmonisation. On Keohane's (1984) account, this pattern is consistent with an early-stage regime, one in which shared interest and reduced transaction costs have brought states to the table and sustained a stable pattern of interaction, but in which the deeper institutionalisation needed to survive changes in political leadership or economic circumstance has not yet been achieved.

The discourse-analytic literature adds an important qualification to this regime-theoretic picture. Following Silver et al.'s (2015) taxonomy, India's Sagarmala and Deep Ocean Mission programmes lean heavily toward a "natural capital" and industrial growth framing of the blue economy, emphasising port infrastructure, deep-sea mineral extraction and maritime trade competitiveness, while South Africa's Operation Phakisa, though also growth-oriented, places somewhat greater emphasis on inclusive economic participation and small-scale fisheries livelihoods, reflecting South Africa's distinct domestic political economy and its post-apartheid emphasis on redress and inclusive development (Findlay, 2018). This is not a fundamental incompatibility, both discourses can and do coexist within a single cooperative relationship, but it does mean that when Indian and South African officials speak of "blue economy cooperation," they are not always referring to precisely the same underlying policy vision, a subtlety that a purely interest-based regime-theoretic account would miss. In addition to the above, there is also another factor that is not explicitly mentioned in the document but fits into the wider geopolitics of the Indian Ocean literature (Doyle, 2018; Mohan, 2012). It is about the larger strategic context in which India-South African collaboration is taking place. The increasing focus on both sides on maritime domain awareness and naval cooperation is impossible to interpret outside the framework of the larger process of external, especially Chinese, military and infrastructure build-up in the western part of the Indian Ocean. In other words, India-South Africa blue economy collaboration, while having a genuine developmental agenda, also has an element of preserving strategic autonomy and multipolarity of the region, making it a resilient relationship based on strategic interests of both actors, although subject to changes in the wider geopolitical context.

It is also worth situating this finding against the broader theoretical debate about how regimes form in the absence of a hegemonic enforcer. Keohane's (1984) "after hegemony" argument holds that cooperation among self-interested states becomes more, not less, important precisely when no single power can or will unilaterally underwrite regional order, because decentralised cooperation then becomes the only available substitute for hegemonic stability. The western Indian Ocean arguably fits this description reasonably well: no single resident power possesses the capacity to underwrite regional maritime order alone, the United States' attention remains substantially divided across other theatres, and China's expanding presence is widely perceived by IORA member states, India and South Africa very much included, as an external rather than resident form of influence. On this reading, India-South Africa cooperation is not simply a bilateral relationship pursued for its own sake, but one instance of a broader pattern in which IORA's resident middle and major powers are attempting, with uneven success, to construct exactly the kind of decentralised cooperative order that Keohane's framework anticipates emerging under conditions of diffused rather than hegemonic power.

Viewed in this manner, the institutional shallowness noted above is not so much a reflection of a failure of the process as it is of the youthfulness of this overall regime building enterprise, a view which is in line with the description offered by Doyle (2018) of IORA as a young and still consolidating institution, despite being more than three decades old. In sum, there does seem to be an ongoing relationship between Australia and IORA which is well-characterized as an emerging regime which displays some true normative convergence and is establishing some institutions, though not enough to create a resource base and rules structure which would allow the process to continue on its own without continued political engagement. Indeed, in order to sustain and deepen this relationship further, it seems likely that the relationship will need to evolve beyond joint communiqués and dialogue mechanisms into more concrete arrangements for achieving cooperation in areas such as funding for joint blue economy projects, data sharing, harmonization of regulations regarding IUU fishing, etc.

CONCLUSION

The study of cooperation in the blue economy between India and South Africa, which has become a prominent feature of bilateral relations over the past decade but which has been studied rather limitedly by academia, has been considered in this paper. Utilizing a qualitative documentary approach to analysis of multilateral, minilateral and bilateral cooperation and employing theoretical approach based on liberal institutionalism and blue economy discourse analysis, the paper has demonstrated that cooperation in the blue economy between India and South Africa should be seen as an emerging regime with rather poor institutional foundations. There is some level of convergence of India and South Africa in terms of shared principles and vision of the Indian Ocean Order, which is development-oriented and autonomy-preserving, underpinned by the membership of both countries in IORA, IBSA and BRICS, as well as by developing bilateral cooperation mechanisms. However, the emergence of a regime is limited by low capacity of multilateral institutions, existence of somewhat different discourses in the area of blue economy in both India and South Africa, as well as by a geopolitics environment, where the rise of external influence in the western Indian Ocean poses incentives and challenges for bilateral relations. Importance of this study extends far beyond the bilateral dimension. Since blue economy governance is fast becoming the key organising principle for Indian Ocean regionalism as a whole, the knowledge of how the two biggest economies in the western rim of the ocean are trying to convert their shared commitment to rhetoric into cooperation will provide insight into the potential and constraints of Indian Ocean multilateralism. The research demonstrates that the rhetoric of the blue economy, thanks to its normative malleability, has been a rather useful tool for aligning India and South Africa in terms of maritime policy issues, yet conversion of this alignment into sustained institutional cooperation is far from complete. A number of areas for future research can be identified. Interview research with officials associated with the implementation of Sagarmala, Operation Phakisa and the IORA Blue Economy Work Programme will significantly enhance the knowledge of real challenges of cooperation, which cannot be understood through documentation alone. Quantitative research tracing actual trade and investment flows in ocean-based sectors between India and South Africa would help assess whether declaratory cooperation is translating into measurable economic engagement. Finally, comparative research examining how India's blue economy partnerships with other Indian Ocean states, such as Mauritius, Seychelles and Indonesia, differ from or resemble the South Africa case would help clarify whether the patterns identified in this paper are specific to the India-South Africa relationship or reflective of a broader pattern in India's Indian Ocean engagement. As both countries continue to invest political capital in their respective ocean economy programmes, the question of whether declaratory convergence can be translated into institutionalised cooperation is likely to remain a central, and still open, question for the future of the relationship.

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