

**Emergence of a New Geopolitical Era in the Indian Ocean:  
Characters, Issues and Limitations of the Indianoceanic Order**

by

**Christian Bouchard**

Department of Geography, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Canada  
cbouchard@laurentian.ca

**Abstract**

Before the European projection that began in the late 15th Century, Indian Ocean populations were bonded by large-scale maritime trading systems and outside influences were minimal. This Pre-Gamian order (referring to the time before Vasco de Gama's trip to the Indies in 1497-98), characterized by regional self-sufficiency and autonomy, was then slowly replaced by the colonial order, characterized by European economic and political control, which culminated in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th Centuries. Since the Second World War, the Indian Ocean Region has seen tremendous geopolitical change as about every littoral State gained its independence, and then saw its international relations subordinated by Cold War constraints, and eventually established regional cooperation with neighbors. In a very short period of time, emancipation from formal foreign control has become a very significant and profound movement.

As a result, the region has definitively entered into a new geopolitical era. The Indianoceanic order, as we propose to call it, is articulated around five main characters, which are:

- 1) The great political, cultural and economic heterogeneity of the region;
- 2) A fragmentation into well-affirmed sub-regional systems, where regional cooperation and economic integration are organized and the geopolitical equilibrium are constructed;
- 3) An emergent Indianoceanic regionalism, which is original in nature and is now formalized by the *Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation* (IOR-ARC);
- 4) A subordination to large foreign powers, especially to those of the industrial Triad (United States, European Union and Japan) which have a tremendous influence on the region even if they do not exercise complete control of it; and
- 5) The very importance of the Indian Ocean itself, as it represents both the major link of the region and its main door to the rest of the World.

Several questions about this new geopolitical order remain to be answered. Among others, if the emancipation trend from foreign influences is to continue, this means that stronger regional economic relations and political cooperation are to be developed. Eventually, in this context, peace, security, military and strategic concerns would have to be back on the forefront of the Indianoceanic agenda.

## **Introduction**

Since the Second World War, a new geopolitical order is shaping up in the Indianoceanic Region. Through the decolonization process that began on the shores of the Indian Ocean as early as 1947 with the Independence of India and Pakistan, the people of the region have regained one after the other the political control over their respective territories. In the 1960s, the old colonial order was definitively replaced by a new order which we suggest to call the Indianoceanic order. But at the same time, the emancipation of the newborn States was seriously slowed down by the projection into the Indian Ocean area of the great ideological, economic and strategic rivalry that opposed the two large superpowers of the time, namely Soviet Union and United States. In the Cold War period, almost all the Indianoceanic States have been compelled to chose a side, even if they often claimed to be non-aligned. This situation has profoundly impacted the geopolitical equilibrium as neighbors sought the support of one or the other superpower as balancer of power. In this context, multilateral economic and political cooperation between all the States of a same geographical area was almost impossible to achieve.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the collapse of the communist block, the disengagement of the Soviets from the international scene and the USSR dissolution have dramatically changed the world's geopolitical system. In the Indianoceanic Region, the end of the Cold War founded expression in a much greater autonomy for States in regards to their international relations, allowing them to develop ties with all neighbors as well as with other farther States. At the same time, regionalism was furthered by the emergence of regional powers and their leadership in the establishment or the renewal of cooperative dynamics between neighboring States. Finally relieved of the constraints of the East-West confrontation, the emancipation of the Indianoceanic States could continue and take a new dimension. The political control over their territories being regained, it is now time for the Indianoceanic people to regain the control of their regional area at both the neighborhood and the whole Indian Ocean scales. In the former case, this allowed economic integration and sectorial cooperation to develop and revitalize the formal international associations of regional vocation. In the latter case, a new and original dynamic of large-scale regionalism has emerged in the second half of the 1990s, a process that is largely related to the conjunction of three fundamental developments which are: India's economic opening, the reintegration of South Africa as a normal member of the international community and the fact that Australia became aware of its Indian Ocean interests.

But the return of some Indianoceanic States (especially the largest regional power that are India, Australia and South Africa) in the front seats of the regional geopolitical system does not mean that the region is no longer subordinated to the global system, and thus to the large world powers (especially those of the industrial Triad which are the United States, the Western Europe States and Japan) as the latter continue to dominate the world system. Therefore, on the contrary of Pre-Gamian and colonial orders, respectively dominated by bordering peoples and European colonial powers (especially United Kingdom as, from 1815 to the mid-twentieth century, the Indian Ocean was nothing less than a "British Lake"), the Indianoceanic order is more complex as both the local States and the foreign large powers shared the command of the Indian Ocean affairs. Today, it seems possible to bring to the fore the main characters of this new Indianoceanic order, an appellation that refers to the regional solidarities that are actually developing and that could play a significant role in the future of the region.

## **Definition of the Indianoceanic Region**

Proposing a definition for the Indianoceanic Region presupposes that we first precise the purpose for which this definition is done and secondly that we identify the criteria that are the most meaningful in this context. If it's true that delimiting a region is a very subjective exercise, this does not imply that the result is futile as, when done properly, it should be representative of a certain reality. If common characters, actions and interests are to be found between neighbors of a specific area, then it should be possible to identify a regional system of interactions linking more or less closely the implicated countries. As the purpose of our work is specifically geopolitical, than the factors of our regionalization will be essentially geopolitical.

For instance, in the context of the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZP) that was the object of UN resolution 2832(XXVI) of 16 December 1971, the extend of the Indian Ocean Region as been defined in 1979 as the Indian Ocean itself, its natural extensions [1], the islands thereon, the ocean floor subjacent thereto, the littoral and hinterland States and the air space above [2]. This definition can be said to be broad as it considers the coastal States of the Persian Gulf [3] and of the Red Sea as well as the land-locked States which transit to and from the sea would mostly be oriented to the Indian Ocean (Figure 1). In the wake of the recent geopolitical developments in Central Asia and the plans to export some of its oil by transiting it to the Indian Ocean shores, the five ex-Soviet Republics of the area can also be considered to be part of the region hinterland. As Indonesia is without any doubt an Indian Ocean coastal State and given the archipelagic nature of its territory, thus its waters should be included as part of the Indian Ocean Region, and East Timor, located between Indonesia and Australia, could therefore also be considered as an Indianoceanic State even if the Timor Sea is often associated to the Pacific Ocean. Finally, as the 60th South parallel marks the limit of the area covered by the Antarctica Treaty, it appears very logical to consider this parallel as the southern limit of the Indianoceanic Region. South of this parallel, the economic and environmental issues as well as the political and strategic context clearly form a distinct geopolitical area.

### **Figure 1. Indianoceanic States and Insular Territories**

A more narrow definition would consider only the littoral States and eventually only those that possess maritime coasts or port facilities on the main body of the Indian Ocean, therefore excluding some coastal States of the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) and the Red Sea (Egypt, Eritrea, Israel, Jordan and Sudan) as well as the land-locked States (Afghanistan, Botswana, Bhutan, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda, Swaziland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Uzbekistan, Zambia and Zimbabwe). For example, this definition corresponds to the understanding of the Indian Ocean Rim as it is actually used by the *Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation* (IOR-ARC).

Making a choice between the broad and the narrow definition makes a lot of difference in regards to the geopolitical characters of the region. For example, the former implies that Israel and Jordan, Kuwait and Iraq, Botswana and Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Burundi, Bhutan and Nepal, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan as well as Saudi Arabia and others would be included in the Indianoceanic Region. In contrast, if one accepts France (for Reunion, Mayotte, the French Indian Ocean Sparse Islands, Crozet, Saint-Paul & Amsterdam and Kerguelen) and United Kingdom (for the British Indian Ocean Territory) as Indian Ocean Rim coastal States, the narrow definition will only include 28 States, which is only half of the 56 States that would be included with the broad definition (Annex 1).

It appears to us that if the Indian Ocean is to be the core element of this region, than maritime affairs should be of first concern in defining the area of the region. At the very least, all the Indianoceanic States will share the same concern of using Indian Ocean as their unique maritime connection or one of their maritime connections to the rest of the world. On this ground, Indian Ocean related land-locked States would be considered as part of the region. Regarding the case of Persian Gulf, as it is a natural extension of the Indian Ocean, which also represents its unique way to the rest of the world, it would make a lot of sense to include its coastal States into the Indianoceanic Region. To help us on this issue, we can also consider that, by adding Persian Gulf coastal States to the region, it is therefore possible to consider more globally the very significant oil traffic from its sources to the chokepoints by which oil tankers leave the Indian Ocean.

Concerning the Red Sea, it is another natural extension of the Indian Ocean, which links it to the Mediterranean Sea by the way of the Bab el Mandeb and the Suez Canal. Not considering Egypt where the canal is located as an Indianoceanic State while at the same time considering Singapore at the Southeastern end of the Malacca Strait to be an Indianoceanic State does not appear to be very consistent. At the same time, Sudan is sharing a maritime common zone of exploitation with Saudi Arabia and Eritrea is one of the transit States for Ethiopia just like Djibouti and Somalia. Thus at least for Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea, on the ground of maritime affairs, it appears to be very logical to include them into the group of Indianoceanic States. This leaves us with the question of Israel and Jordan that both possess a port at the bottom of the Gulf of Aqaba. In practice, this would be enough to make them Indianoceanic States in relation with the broad definition. Excluding them would mean that they would have no say in the discussion on maritime affairs even if they are in fact very much interested by these as Aqaba is the unique Jordan port and Israeli navy is operating in the Red Sea. One should also remember that, following the Six Days War, the Israeli forced the closure of Suez Canal between 1967 and 1975. Thus, for these reasons, it appears that Israel and Jordan should also be considered as Indianoceanic States.

In regards to the geopolitical issues commonly shared by the Indian Ocean States, maritime issues are more relevant than any other considerations and for that reason the broad definition should be used (Figure 1 and Annex 1). This interpretation does not mean that a formal regional association should necessarily include all of those 56 States, especially if its purposes are mainly commercial. But, eventually, if this association is to address seriously maritime affairs as well as peace and security issues, then it would have to be a forum with a very broad membership.

### **The great heterogeneity of the region**

The Indianoceanic Region covers some 105.6 millions sq km for which the Indian Ocean itself accounts for some 68.6 millions sq km (CIA, *World Factbook 2003*). Together, the continental and insular lands of the 56 Indianoceanic States cover 37 millions sq km, hence representing 35% of the total region area, and are inhabited by some 2.46 billions of peoples (PRB, *2003 World Population Data Sheet*). The first character of the region is its very great heterogeneity in regard to territorial, demographic, political, ethnic, cultural, economic and military matters. While the unequal resources distribution is a indisputable permanence, the great disparities of development between Indianoceanic societies will also remain for a long time as a very significant factor to consider, more especially as in the next decades the demographic increase will continue to be high in the countries that have until now the less progressed on the way of social and economic development. Quite obviously, the fact that the political (States territories), ethno-cultural (ethno-cultural groups) and economic (activities and

potentialities) maps do not match one to another represents a fundamental element of the regional geopolitical framework.

In regards to political matters, it should first be pointed out that the number of real democratic regimes is still quite low while several territories are not anymore under legitimate governmental control (cases of the "delimited chaos" under the effective control of rebel/militarized groups). If, in general, democratization has made some important progress since the end of the 1980s, it is also true that several areas have also fallen into civil war situation. In fact, since decolonization, the Indian Ocean has been more a zone of war than a zone of peace as international conflicts and secessionist movements have been numerous and concerned every sub-region. If some progresses have been made in the recognition of international borders, pacification of border areas is still to be achieved in many places. In addition, direct implication from a neighboring States or its indirect support to a particular group often contributes to fuel national conflicts and creates regional instability.

Concerning ethno-cultural matters, they appear to be of first importance as the two main antagonisms of the Indianoceanic area are mostly driven by religious factors and while religion and ethnicity are at the roots of the conflicts that arise at national scale. Thus, the Israeli-Arab and Indian-Pakistani conflicts are intrinsically related to the antagonisms between Jews and Muslims on the one hand, and between the Muslims and the Hindus on the other hand. Elsewhere, the relations that are established between the majority groups and the minorities often represent a fundamental element of the national political life. Finally, the presence of Indian, Muslim and even Chinese communities all over the region represents an important cultural element that should contribute to an Indianoceanic identity. For us, even if ethno-cultural factors have fueled many conflicts until now, the great variety of people could well be one of the regional richness in an eventual peaceful and cooperative Indianoceanic world; if of course such a world is to develop.

Table 1  
**The nine economic powers of the Indianoceanic Region**

	<b>Percentage of the regional GNP</b>	<b>Percentage of the regional GNP express in PPP <sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Percentage of regional exports</b>	<b>Indicator of economic power IEP <sup>(b)</sup></b>
India	16,41	30,50	5,10	17,34
Australia	15,68	7,11	8,89	10,56
Indonesia	8,73	10,87	7,78	9,13
Singapore	4,09	1,66	20,31	8,69
Thailand	6,78	6,66	8,19	7,21
Malaysia	3,93	3,89	11,79	6,54
Saudi Arabia	5,90	3,36	9,47	6,24
South Africa	5,39	5,25	4,55	5,06
Iran	5,98	6,13	1,94	4,68
The nine States	72,89	75,43	78,01	75,44

(a) In Purchasing Power Parity. (b) IEP represents the mean of all three percentages.

Data for 1998 and regional total excluding Central Asian States. Source: Bouchard, 2000, p. 71.

In regard to economic matters, the Indianoceanic region appears clearly multi-polar and dominated by its relations with the industrial Triad. The economic pavement is essentially characterized by a very large disparity between national economies, the significance of natural resources and the weakness of

intra-regional trade. The regional economic powers are India, Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Iran (Table 1). Together, these nine countries cumulate 72.9% of the Indianoceanic GNP and 78.0% of the regional exports. The economic geography of the region is dominated by the oil production in the Persian Gulf and the related maritime oil fluxes, the industrial productions of the South-East Asian tigers that are intended to the world markets, the Singapore commercial and financial crossroads, the mineral resources of Southern Africa, Australia and Indonesia (oil and gas included), the diversified economy of India and the size of its national market, as well as a great variety and large quantities of tropical products exported to the developed countries of the North.

Finally, concerning military matters, the power of the armed forces from the Middle East, South and South-East Asia contrasts with the weakness of the African forces. The race for modern armaments is a significant fact of the last decades in what we have called the "Indianoceanic arc of militarization" which stretches from Egypt to Indonesia and Australia. This strengthening of military power especially concerns naval and ballistic capabilities. At a time where the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) increases considerably the destructive capacity, the strategic area of the Indianoceanic States, that have been essentially confined to land in the past, is now widening to sea, air and even space. This definitively makes the regional conflicts more dangerous and can complicate the maneuvers of foreign militaries in the region. Without any doubt, India is the largest Indianoceanic military power, but it does not possess the necessary means to control the whole Indian Ocean. Its armed forces must concentrate first on their mission of territorial defense, especially in the context of the Indo-Pakistani rivalry, while paying more attention to the Chinese developing interests for the Indian Ocean. Elsewhere, Afghanistan and Iraq are the object of American-led military interventions and engaging in difficult State rebuilding processes while the Americans are also increasing their pressure on Tehran about Iran ballistic and WMD capabilities [4].

### **The sub-regional systems**

In the Indianoceanic Region, due to the generalized limited power of the States and thus to the fact that their area of influence is usually constrained to their close neighbors, analysis of conflictual and cooperative dynamics must first be done at the sub-regional scale. It is at this level that the main power relations are established, that the significant geopolitical equilibrium are formed as well as that the operative economic and political integration process are organized. Thus, the second character of the region is its division into sub-regional systems. In this context, the Indian Ocean has often been qualified as a scattered geopolitical area or even has been denied the status of geopolitical area as Indianoceanic relations and interactions were so weak. Today, no contradiction appears between the fact that there is a large-scale Indianoceanic system developing at the same time that sub-regional systems remain of first significance. In the predictable future, the former is not to replace the latter, it will rather complement them and put them into closer relation.

In the Indian Ocean Region, nine original and distinct regional sub-systems coexist, namely: Southern Africa, Eastern Africa, South-West Indian Ocean Islands, Horn of Africa, Persian Gulf, Central Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and the very particular and remote area of the Austral Islands and EEZ (Figure 2). These sub-systems are bounded to larger regional systems such as those of the African Union, the Broad Middle East or Asia Pacific, and of course to the Indianoceanic system, as well as, at the highest scale, to the World system. Only six States of the Indian Ocean Region are not included into one of these nine sub-region, namely: Australia, East Timor, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Yemen.

## **Figure 2. The Indianoceanic regional sub-systems and peripheral regional systems**

The sub-regional analysis shows that the economic integration, which was very minimal in the beginning of the 1990's in most of the Indianoceanic Region, now represents a profound movement and a progressing process (despite several difficulties). This can be shown by the dynamism of the international organizations of regional vocation (Table 2 and Table 3) that pursue the goal of establishing free-trade areas (SADC, ASEAN, EAC) or custom unions (GCC, COMESA; while SACU new agreement entered into force in 2002). Other regional associations have developed significant sectorial cooperation and, even if advanced economic integration is not yet framed in a timetable, they already form a preferential trade area (SAARC, COI) or progress in this direction (IGAD) [5]. Economic integration is also promoted by some new initiatives that are now developed outside of the formal sub-regional framework already in place (e.g. BIMST-EC, MGC and Kunming Initiative) [6].

Table 2  
**Regional Associations in the Indianoceanic Region**

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
COI	Indian Ocean Commission
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
AEC	Commission for East African Co-operation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council or Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf
IGAD	The Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOR-ARC	Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SACU	Southern African Customs Union
SADC	Southern African Development Community

As economic integration could not be achieved without a minimum of political cooperation, regionalism contributes in several ways to the promotion of peace and security between associated States. But on this matter, a lot remains to be done, as conflictual dynamics are still very fundamental in most of the sub-regional systems. With its three specific protocols [7] and its Regional Forum addressing peace, security and stability issues, ASEAN has develop an original framework that could serve as a model in the other sub-regions of the Indian Ocean. Elsewhere, even where conflicts are ongoing or tensions remain high, regional political cooperation is generally making some progress as can be shown by the work of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, the Somalia and Sudan peace processes running under the auspices of the IGAD, as well as the GCC security agreement of 1994. On the other hand, multilateral peace and security cooperation is not yet on the agenda of neither the SAARC nor the IOR-ARC (India's position on this issue being largely responsible for that situation).

Table 3

**Membership of the regional associations in the Indianoceanic Region**

	COI	SACU <sup>a</sup>	SADC	EAC	COMESA <sup>a</sup>	IGAD	GCC	SAARC	ASEAN	IOR-ARC
Comoros	X				X					
Madagascar	X				X					X
Mauritius	X		X		X					X
Reunion, France for	X									
Seychelles	X		(w)		X					(w)
Botswana		X	X							
Lesotho		X	X							
(Namibia)		X	X		X					
South Africa		X	X							X
Swaziland		X	X		X					
(Angola)			X		X					
(D.R. of Congo)			X		X					
Malawi			X		X					
Mozambique			X							X
Tanzania			X	X						X
Zambia			X		X					
Zimbabwe			X		X					
Burundi					X					
Djibouti					X	X				
Egypt					X					
Eritrea					X	X				
Ethiopia					X	X				
Kenya				X	X	X				X
Rwanda					X					
Sudan					X	X				
Uganda				X	X	X				
Somalia						X				
Bahrain							X			
Kuwait							X			
Oman							X			X
Qatar							X			
Saudi Arabia							X			
United Arab Emirates							X			X
Bangladesh								X		X
Bhutan								X		
India								X		X
Maldives								X		
Nepal								X		
Pakistan								X		
Sri Lanka								X		X
Burma (Myanmar)									X	
(Brunei)									X	
(Cambodia)									X	
Indonesia									X	X
(Laos)									X	
Malaysia									X	X
(Philippines)									X	
Singapore									X	X
Thailand									X	X
(Vietnam)									X	
Australia										X
Iran										X
Yemen										X

<sup>a</sup> SACU and COMESA are not formal regional associations but rather regional treaties respectively establishing a custom union and a common market/free trade area. In brackets: States that are not considered as belonging to the Indianoceanic Region. Dialogue partners and observers are not taken into account in this table. In addition, the Cross-Border Initiative (CBI), which includes 14 African States, seeks a market driven concept of integration in Eastern and Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands countries. (w) Facing a financial crisis, Seychelles withdrawn from SADC and IOR in 2003.



## The emergent Indianoceanic regionalism

The third character of the Indianoceanic Region is the emergence of a large-scale regional dynamic of relations and interactions. The concept of Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) as a community of solidarity implies that a regional identity is developed and that a regional cooperation is organized. It is in the conjunction of these two parallel processes that the IOR will find all its substance. Presently, this large scale regionalism does not represent a strong reality (political, economic or cultural) that dominate the Indianoceanic system, but it is definitively making progress, both from above (by the way of the international relations that are realized and promoted by the States) and from under (by the way of the transnational relations that take the form of cultural, professional, academic, humanitarian and economic networks). Thus, the Indian Ocean Rim is an emergent reality that, in all likelihood, constitutes a profound and probably irreversible movement. For this reason, the Indianoceanic regionalism could well affirm itself as one significant element of the region geopolitical framework in the twenty-first century. This evolution would be very consistent with an actual generalized trend in international relations, as the States can no longer leave aside their regional environment.

Established in 1997, the *Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation* (IOR-ARC) represents the institutional counterpart of the Indianoceanic regionalism. It is essentially an economic process that as the goals of promoting the inter-regional relations as well as of facilitating the integration of the national economies into the world economy. At the moment, only the States that possess a port on the main ocean body (thus excluding the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, but not the Malacca/Singapore Strait) have been invited to join the Association, a politic that therefore disable some important and influential coastal States like Saudi Arabia from admission and marginalize the land-locked States whose transit is oriented to the Indian Ocean. Whatever the economic objectives of the IOR-ARC, the Indianoceanic cooperation would have to be extended to peace and security, otherwise the ideal of emancipation of the Indian Ocean Rim as an Indianoceanic community that effectively control the region will never fully be realized. It is moreover on these latter issues that a regional shared interest in the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZP) has for the first time very effectively and formally bounded the Indianoceanic States together. Whatever the reasons for the failure of the IOZP [8], academic works, diplomatic negotiations and political debates that have been achieved in relation to it have promoted the concept of an Indian Ocean community.

In addition to the common concerns, the Indian Ocean Rim cannot be evoked without consideration for the role and influence of the three Indianoceanic powers, which are India, Australia and South Africa. These States are the only ones that possess all the necessary attributes (political, economic, cultural and even military) to effectively exercise a certain leadership at the regional scale. All three play the card of the South-South relations and try to gain something out of the emergent regionalism: India pursuing its old ambition of regional pre-eminence (with an eventual international recognition that could, for example, take the form of a permanent membership at the Security Council), Australia looking mostly to seize good economic opportunities that are arising from developing economies (e.g. *Mozal Project* in Mozambique) and emergent markets (e.g. United Arab Emirates), and South Africa extending its interests and influence far over its traditional privileged area covering Southern Africa and the South-West Indian Ocean Islands. But these three large regional powers are not the only Indianoceanic States able to exercise some influence on the region, especially on economic matters (Table 1), nor are they the only ones exercising strong regional diplomatic leadership (e.g. Mauritius [9]).

Outside the formal action of States, associations of every kind increasingly network the region. Some like the *Indian Ocean Rim Business Forum* (OIRBF), the *Indian Ocean Rim Academic Group*

(IORAG) and the *Indian Ocean Tourism Organization* (IOTO, as observer) are linked to the IOR-ARC, and thus should play a role in orienting the future development of the Indianoceanic regionalism. But the other associations are as important as they link more and more individuals of all over the region, and therefore contribute to the promotion of a wide regional identity. In this particular context, three different solidarities can be exploited as the root of this regional identity:

- First, the promotion of South-South relations and common interests which are developed in reaction to both the colonial past and the actual economic domination of the North, and thus implies an emancipation from the influences of the large foreign powers;
- Secondly, the Indian diaspora, which represents a significant Indianoceanic actor that has already developed commercial, financial and cultural networks covering the whole region, and acts at the same time as a very effective mean of diffusion for India's influence;
- Thirdly, Islam, which is the most common religion of the region, and especially in a crescent that goes from Comoros Islands to Malaysia and Indonesia and covers the Middle East, a cultural factor that could eventually weight a lot in countering the Indian goal of regional pre-eminence, and eventually in promoting emancipation from the Western World and the large developed foreign powers.

If these three regional solidarities are far more than only potential, they are also limited by the fact that none of them is neither specific to the region nor of first significance in the whole region. The admission of France for Reunion and Mayotte will probably not change the general situation in regard to these solidarities, but if the Red Sea and Persian Gulf coastal States (especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia) were to be more closely bounded to the Indianoceanic regionalism and gain IOR-ARC membership as well as Pakistan, then Indian and Muslim influences could find a fertile ground for competition, if not confrontation, in addition to the desired cooperation. At the same time, leaving those States out of the regionalization process will mean that some big regional players will be left aside, and therefore that the strength of the regional association could be diminish. Thus, considering the main solidarities on which the Indianoceanic regionalism can evolve, ideological and political issues are very significant even if economy is the official objective of the IOR-ARC.

### **Figure 3. Indian Ocean Rim: broad and narrow memberships**

#### **The subordination to large foreign powers**

Subordination to the large foreign powers represents the fourth character of the Indianoceanic region. This is very meaningful because of the conjunction of two factors. First, the domination of the global system on the Indianoceanic system, inescapable because of the relative weakness of the Indianoceanic States compared to the large world powers, means that the regional economic and even geopolitical contexts are strongly dependent of the global system on which they often exercise a very minimal influence. Second, the extrovert character of the region, which is very much a colonial heritage, means that the Indianoceanic States maintain more important relations with foreign States than between them. In these conditions, the influence of the large foreign powers is predominant and multifaceted.

On the one hand, this influence is predominant in the context where the actual regional equilibrium is largely related to the large powers actions and interests and to which it is globally very favorable. This is a fundamental point as for the industrial Triad the region is both a vast resources reservoir to exploit and a large market to conquest, two essential facts for the good functioning and wealth of the dominant developed industrial economies. On the other hand, this influence is multifaceted as the general influence of the large foreign powers is the resultant of various factors ranging from economic to cultural, military and diplomatic in nature. The specific influence of each large foreign power on the Indianoceanic system depends especially on its interests in the region, the means it disposes to promote and defend them as well as the will it demonstrates to secure them.

As the main attributes of the State power can be evoked as hard power (military capabilities), economic power (trade, finance, foreign direct investment, international aid), soft power (cultural production, control of the means of diffusion) and political power (diplomatic weight, capabilities to extend traditional diplomacy by economic or even military actions), it is therefore possible to analyze the specific influence of each great foreign powers through their different power manifestations. As there is no absolute measure for these manifestations, the results are best expressed in terms of relativity and in the form of a comparative table (Table 4). It is also important to note that the proposed classification of foreign influence is representative of the actual situation, and thus, has greatly evolve since the end of the Cold War and should continue to evolve in the future.

Table 4  
**The large foreign powers influence in the Indianoceanic region**

<b>Field</b>	<b>Predominant</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Weak</b>	<b>Very weak or non-existent</b>
<b>Military</b> <i>(hard power)</i>	United States	United Kingdom France	China Russia	Japan Germany
<b>Economy</b> <i>(economic power)</i>	United States Japan European Union*	United Kingdom Germany France China	Russia	
<b>Culture</b> <i>(soft power)</i>	United States United Kingdom		France China	Russia Germany Japan
<b>Diplomacy</b> <i>(political power)</i>	United States	United Kingdom Russia France China	Japan	Germany

\* The large European powers have maintained specific military and cultural influences while their economic influence is clearly more collective as members of the European Union.

### **The preponderance of the Indian Ocean**

The Indian Ocean itself is far more than just the geometric center of the region. If we cannot assert that it is its geographical center, as the regional poles are all located on its shores, it is clearly not a simple

periphery. In fact, the Indian Ocean is the core element of the region as the sea is both the regional hyphen and therefore its fundamental unifying factor, and its major door to the outside and therefore its main interface with the rest of the world.

If the Indian Ocean under-maritimisation is a fact [10], this does not mean that the maritime affairs are negligible for the Indianoceanic States. On the contrary, this situation appears to be related to the generalized lower level of development of the region, to its secondary role in the world economy dominated by the large economic powers of the industrial Triad, as well as to the weakness of the intra-regional exchanges; three features that are largely bounded to the colonial heritage. It is also important to nuance this global under-maritimisation as, at national and local scales, the sea often constitutes an element of great significance. For example, we can evoke the oil States of the Persian Gulf and the regional commercial powers (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia), the former for their exploitation of offshore resources and the latter for the role of maritime fluxes in their economy, as well as the thousands of coastal communities scattered all around the area and that rely fully or partly on the sea for their living.

The major maritime issues, factors of very first significance in the Indianoceanic geopolitical framework, principally concern:

- The territorialisation of the sea, which is largely uncompleted as only 28 maritime borders out of 65 potential borders have been the object of a formal delimitation (often only unfunctional), a situation that is complicated by the remaining insular territorial disputes [11]: Mayotte (between France and Comoros), Chagos (between United Kingdom and Mauritius), Abu Musa (between Iran and U.A.E.), Tromelin, Bassas da India, Europa, Gloriosos and Juan de Nova (between France and Madagascar), Nok, Lam and Khan (between Burma and Thailand), Batu Putish and Pisang (between Singapore and Malaysia);
- The fluidity and the security of maritime transport, especially in the strategic passages where the main fluxes concentrate (Suez Canal, Bab el Mandeb, Ormuz, Malacca/Singapore, Sunda and Lombok straits), and the very serious problems of piracy (especially in South East Asia waters and off the coasts of the Indian sub-continent and the Horn of Africa), smuggling (e.g. general products, peoples, drugs and arms), and even now of maritime terrorism (especially in the North-West Indian Ocean);
- The exploitation of marine resources (biologic, mineral and energetic), which are very unequally distributed and are largely controlled by the coastal States as these enjoy exclusive rights on the resources of their EEZ and continental shelf, but extend to general concerns like in the case of the tuna fisheries regulated by the *Indian Ocean Tuna Commission* (IOTC) or the illegal fishing activities recorded around in several areas (e.g. in the EEZ of the Austral Islands);
- The military use of the sea, as nothing in the international law formally bans foreign naval maneuvers outside the territorial sea of any coastal State and warships of all nations enjoy the right of transit passage in the international straits (UNCLOS, Art. 38) [12], a situation that allows the large naval powers to position, in function of their geopolitical goals and strategic needs, warships all over the Indian Ocean, and gives them a great operational liberty;
- The transit from and to the sea of the land-locked States, which necessitates the collaboration of the transit States, adequate communication networks and the transit security, without which the enclave situation is a strong development constraint for any land-locked States;

- The marine environmental degradation, that threatens water quality, marine biological resources and coral reefs (e.g. in the Red Sea), and therefore can affect negatively fishing (e.g. Persian Gulf) and tourism activities, as well as sea level rise that should impact severely low-laying islands and lands (e.g. Maldives, Mouths of the Ganges).

## Conclusion

With the decolonization that followed the Second World War, the Indian Ocean Basin entered into a new geopolitical era. One after the others, the populations of the region regained the political control over their territories in a quest for national independence that led to the creation of the modern Indianoceanic Asian, African and Islands States. But, as meaningful as it was, this was only the first step on the way of emancipation from the domination of foreign large powers. In the 1990s, being now free of the constraints of the Cold War, a second very important step was to be achieved as economic integration and political cooperation could become more dynamic and efficient between neighbors of the same geographical areas and while an old wish of the Indian Ocean Rim cooperation could finally be realized. If the former is in several ways related to the globalization that forces neighbors to face together common problems and develop their complementarities, the latter is the concrete manifestation of an emergent large-scale regionalism that is building over the concepts of Indian Ocean community, identity and solidarity.

Thus, the populations of the region are now in the process of regaining some leadership and control over their region at both the neighborhood and the Indianoceanic scales. In this new context, emancipation continues to progress as some Indianoceanic influential States now have a real role to play and exercise leadership at both the sub-regional and the regional scales. Nevertheless, in all likelihood, the Indianoceanic Region and its sub-regions will continue for a long time to be greatly influenced by foreign large powers, and especially those of the industrial Triad. The Indianoceanic order that succeeded to the colonial order is strongly influenced by the new place that the Indianoceanic States and populations take in the geopolitical framework of the region. If it is not possible to know how far this emancipation trend will go, it is quite conceivable that what has been gained to date will remain as a fundamental element of the Indian Ocean geopolitics in the 21st century.

With this emancipation process in backdrop, our analysis has identified five main characters for the new Indianoceanic order which are:

- 1) The great political, cultural and economic heterogeneity of the region;
- 2) A fragmentation into well-affirmed sub-regional systems, where economic integration and political cooperation are first organized and the geopolitical equilibrium are constructed;
- 3) An emergent Indianoceanic regionalism, which is original in nature and is now formalized by the *Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation* (IOR-ARC);
- 4) A subordination to large foreign powers, especially to those of the industrial Triad (United States, European Union and Japan) which have a tremendous influence on the region even if they do not exercise complete control of it; and
- 5) The very importance of the Indian Ocean itself, as it represents both the hyphen of the region and its main door to the rest of the World.

Finally, this work demonstrated that the Indian Ocean geopolitics is far more than the specific oil issues and the military uses of the sea by the large foreign powers. It is multifaceted in nature and influenced by factors that play at all scales from local to global. It is especially rich in conflictual and cooperative dynamics at the sub-regional level. As one of its new feature, the emergent Indianoceanic regionalism raises new issues for the 21st century. If there is a clear quest for more cultural, economic, politic and even strategic emancipation from the large foreign powers, this does not necessary means that a wide and dynamic regional cooperation is to be successfully developed.

---

## Notes and references

[1] According to the limits dressed by the International Hydrographic Organization, the Indian Ocean formally includes the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Mozambique Channel, the Arabian Sea, the Laccadive Sea, the Gulf of Mannar, the Palk Bay, the Bay of Bengal, the Andaman Sea, the Strait of Malacca and the Great Australian Bight. On the other hand, it excludes the Java Sea, the Banda Sea, the Arafura Sea and the Timor Sea as well as the Indonesian straits, the Torres Strait and the Bass Strait.

[2] *Report of the meeting of the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean*, General Assembly, 34th Session, Suppl. no. 45 (A/34/45). Even if it propose a geographical delimitation for the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, this report states that “the final limits of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace have yet to be agreed upon”, an agreement that did not materialise yet.

[3] Some prefer to call it Arabo-Persian Gulf as it is neither uniquely bordered by Arabs nor Persians; others call it Arabian Gulf.

[4] If Iraq and Iran have been often pinpointed as the most dangerous threat for the regional peace and stability with their ballistic missile and weapon of mass destruction capabilities, we should not forget that Israel, India and Pakistan are nuclear powers and that several other Indianoceanic States possess ballistic missiles.

[5] Regional Associations on the Internet:

ASEAN: [www.aseansec.org](http://www.aseansec.org)

COI: [www.coi-info.org](http://www.coi-info.org)

COMESA: [www.comesa.int](http://www.comesa.int)

EAC: [www.tanzania-online.gov.uk/eacommunity.html](http://www.tanzania-online.gov.uk/eacommunity.html)

GCC: [www.gcc-sg.org](http://www.gcc-sg.org)

IGAD: [www.igad.org](http://www.igad.org)

SAARC: [www.saarc-sec.org](http://www.saarc-sec.org)

SACU: [www.dfa.gov.za/for-relations/multilateral/sacu.htm](http://www.dfa.gov.za/for-relations/multilateral/sacu.htm)

SADC: [www.sadc.int](http://www.sadc.int)

[6] BIMST-EC: Bangladesh, India, Myanmar (Burma), Sri Lanka, Thailand - Economic Cooperation.  
MGC: Mekong Ganga Cooperation (Cambodia, India, Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam).  
The Kunming Initiative interlocks India's northeast region, Bangladesh, Burma and southwest China.

[7] The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration, and the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ).

[8] The concept of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace (IOZP) has not been officially abandoned by the United Nations. The Ad Hoc Committee on Indian Ocean is still alive and its chairman continues its informal consultations on the matter. Even if the IOZP remains on the official agenda of the General Assembly, there is no sign that it will be possible to go ahead with the concept definition and implementation in a foreseeable future (Bouchard, 2003).

[9] Mauritius has played an essential role in the promotion of a formal Indianoceanic regional association. After several consultations with the other States of the region, and especially the three Indianoceanic powers, Mauritius launched the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative (IORI) in 1995, which eventually led to the establishment of the IOR-ARC in 1997. The IOR-ARC Coordinating Secretariat has been open in Mauritius in 2000. Other States do have influence, for example Sri Lanka in the IOZP process and Malaysia for the promotion of South-South cooperation, Asia-African relationship and Islamic solidarity.

[10] In an extensive work on sea and the geostrategy of nations, Vigarié (1995) identifies the under-maritimisation and the richness of transit as the two main characters of the Indian Ocean Region. For this author, the Indian Ocean is the ocean of under-development which is not only manifest on its littoral but also at sea as a result of a relatively weak participation to maritime transport and the small and insufficient exploitation of the marine resources. Globally, Indian Ocean under-maritimisation is expressed in the small intra-regional level of exchanges, the small size of the national fleet tonnage expressed to the number of inhabitants, and we will add the limited naval and coast guard capabilities of several States.

[11] In a recent Judgment (17 December 2002), the International Court of Justice stated that the sovereignty over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan belongs to Malaysia.

[12] The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been adopted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994.

## **Bibliography**

BOUCHARD, Christian (2000). *L'espace indianocéanique, un système géopolitique en recomposition*. Quebec (Canada): Laval University, Department of Geography, Ph.D. thesis, 329 pages.

BOUCHARD, Christian (2003). "The case for security and strategic matters in the Indian Ocean regional cooperation". Hyderabad: Osmania University, Centre for Indian Ocean Studies, *Indian Ocean Digest*, vol. 17, no. 2, July-December 2002, pp. 13-21.

CIA (2003). *The World Factbook 2003*. <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>. Last visit on 7 November 2003.

FORBES, Vivian L. (1995). *The maritime boundaries of the Indian Ocean*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 267 pages.

LAUSEIG, Jérôme (2000). "L'Indian Ocean Rim à l'épreuve de la géopolitique, contribution à l'étude des formes nouvelles du régionalisme" *in* Institut Austral de Démographie (I.A.D.). *Actes du séminaire du 26 novembre 1999*. Reunion: Observatoire du Développement de la Réunion (O.D.R.), pages 51-69.

MAURICE, Pierre and GOHIN, Olivier (ed.) (1994). *International relations in the Indian Ocean*. Reunion: Université de la Réunion, Centre d'Études et de Recherches en Relations Internationales et Géopolitique de l'Océan Indien (CERIGOI), pages 219-231.

McPHERSON, Kenneth (1998). *The Indian Ocean, a history of people and the sea*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, Oxford India Paperbacks, 327 pages.

PRB (2003). *World Population Data Sheet*. Washington: Population Reference Bureau (PRB).

RAO, P.V. (ed.) (2003). *India and Indian Ocean in the Twilight of the Millenium, Essays in honour of Professor Satish Chandra*. Hyderabad / Delhi: Centre for Indian Ocean Studies / South Asian Publishers, 239 pages.

UNITED NATIONS (1979). *Report of the meeting of the littoral and hinterland states of the Indian Ocean*. New York: General Assembly, Thirty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 45 (A/34/45), 18 pages.

UNDP (2003). *Human Development Report 2003, Millennium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty*. New York: The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Oxford University Press, 367 pp.

VIGARIÉ, André (1995). *La mer et la géostratégie des nations*. Paris: Economica and Institut de stratégie comparée (ISC), Coll. Bibliothèque stratégique, 432 pages.

WRIGGINS, W. Howard (ed.) (1992). *Dynamics of regional politics: 4 systems on the Indian Ocean*. New York: Columbia University Press, 338 pages.



## Annex 1

**Basic data for states and territories of the Indian Ocean Region**

	<b>Total area</b> (sq.km)	<b>Population</b> mid-2003 (millions)	<b>Absolute</b> <b>density</b> (inh./sq.km)	<b>H.D.I.</b> 2001	<b>G.D.P.</b> Est. 2001 (billions PPP US\$)
Afghanistan	647 500	28.7	44	-----	-----
Australia	7 686 850	19.9	3	0.939	491.8
--- Ashmore & Cartier	5	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- Christmas I.	135	0.002	15	-----	-----
--- Cocos Is (or Keeling)	14	0.001	71	-----	-----
--- Heard & McDonald	412	-----	-----	-----	-----
Bahrain	665	0.7	1 053	0.839	10.5
Bangladesh	144 000	146.7	1 019	0.502	214.1
Bhutan	47 000	0.9	19	0.511	3.8
Botswana	600 370	1.6	3	0.614	13.3
Burma	678 500	49.5	73	0.549	49.5
Burundi	27 830	6.1	219	0.337	4.8
Comoros	2 170	0.6	276	0.528	1.1
Djibouti	23 000	0.7	30	0.462	1.5
East Timor	15 007	0.8	53	-----	-----
Egypt	1 001 450	72.1	72	0.648	229.4
Eritrea	121 320	4.4	36	0.446	4.3
Ethiopia	1 127 127	70.7	63	0.359	53.3
France	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- Crozet	325	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- Indian Ocean Sparse Islands	30	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- Kerguelen	7 215	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- Mayotte	374	0.2	535	-----	-----
--- Reunion I.	2 517	0.8	318	-----	-----
--- Saint-Paul & Amsterdam	61	-----	-----	-----	-----
India	3 287 590	1,068.6	325	0.590	2 930.0
--- Andaman & Nicobar	8 249	0.3	36	-----	-----
--- Lakshadweep	32	0.05	1 563	-----	-----
Indonesia	1 919 440	220.5	115	0.682	615.2
Iran	1 648 000	66.6	40	0.719	387.2
Iraq	437 072	24.2	55	-----	-----
Israel	20 770	6.7	323	0.905	125.9
Jordan	92 300	5.5	60	0.743	19.5
Kazakhstan	2 717 300	14.8	5	0.765	96.8
Kenya	582 650	31.6	54	0.489	30.1
Kuwait	17 820	2.4	135	0.820	38.2
Kyrgyzstan	198 500	5.0	25	0.727	13.6
Lesotho	30 355	1.8	59	0.510	5.0

	<b>Total area</b> (sq.km)	<b>Population</b> mid-2003 (millions)	<b>Absolute</b> <b>density</b> (inh./sq.km)	<b>H.D.I.</b> 2001	<b>G.D.P.</b> Est. 2001 (billions PPP US\$)
Madagascar	587 040	17.0	29	0.468	13.3
Malawi	118 480	11.7	99	0.387	6.0
Malaysia	329 750	25.1	76	0.790	208.3
Maldives	300	0.3	1 000	0.751	1.4
Mauritius	2 040	1.2	588	0.779	11.8
Mozambique	801 590	17.5	22	0.356	20.6
Nepal	140 800	25.2	179	0.499	30.9
Oman	212 460	2.6	12	0.755	29.0
Pakistan	803 940	149.1	185	0.499	266.7
Qatar	11 437	0.6	52	0.826	11.9
Rwanda	26 338	8.3	315	0.422	10.9
Saudi Arabia	1 960 582	24.1	12	0.769	285.3
Seychelles	455	0.1	220	0.840	1.3
Singapore	693	4.2	6 061	0.884	93.7
Somalia	637 657	8.0	13	-----	-----
South Africa	1 219 912	44.0	36	0.684	488.2
--- Prince Edward Is.	334	-----	-----	-----	-----
Sri Lanka	65 610	19.3	294	0.730	59.6
Sudan	2 505 810	38.1	15	0.503	62.3
Swaziland	17 363	1.2	69	0.547	4.6
Tajikistan	143 100	6.6	46	0.677	7.3
Tanzania	945 087	35.4	37	0.400	18.0
Thailand	514 000	63.1	123	0.768	391.7
Turkmenistan	488 100	5.7	12	0.748	23.5
Uganda	236 040	25.3	107	0.489	33.9
United Arab Emirates	82 880	3.9	47	0.816	59.5
United Kingdom	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
--- British Indian Ocean Territory	60	-----	-----	-----	-----
Uzbekistan	447 400	25.7	57	0.729	61.6
Yemen	527 970	19.4	37	0.470	14.3
--- Socotra	3 626	0.05	-----	-----	-----
Zambia	752 614	10.9	14	0.386	8.0
Zimbabwe	390 580	12.6	32	0.496	29.3

Major sources: PRB, *2003 World Population Data Sheet* (population); CIA, *The World Factbook 2003* (total area); UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (HDI and GDP); GDP estimated from population and GDP per inhabitant for Bhutan, Burma, Maldives, Qatar, Seychelles and United Arab Emirates.

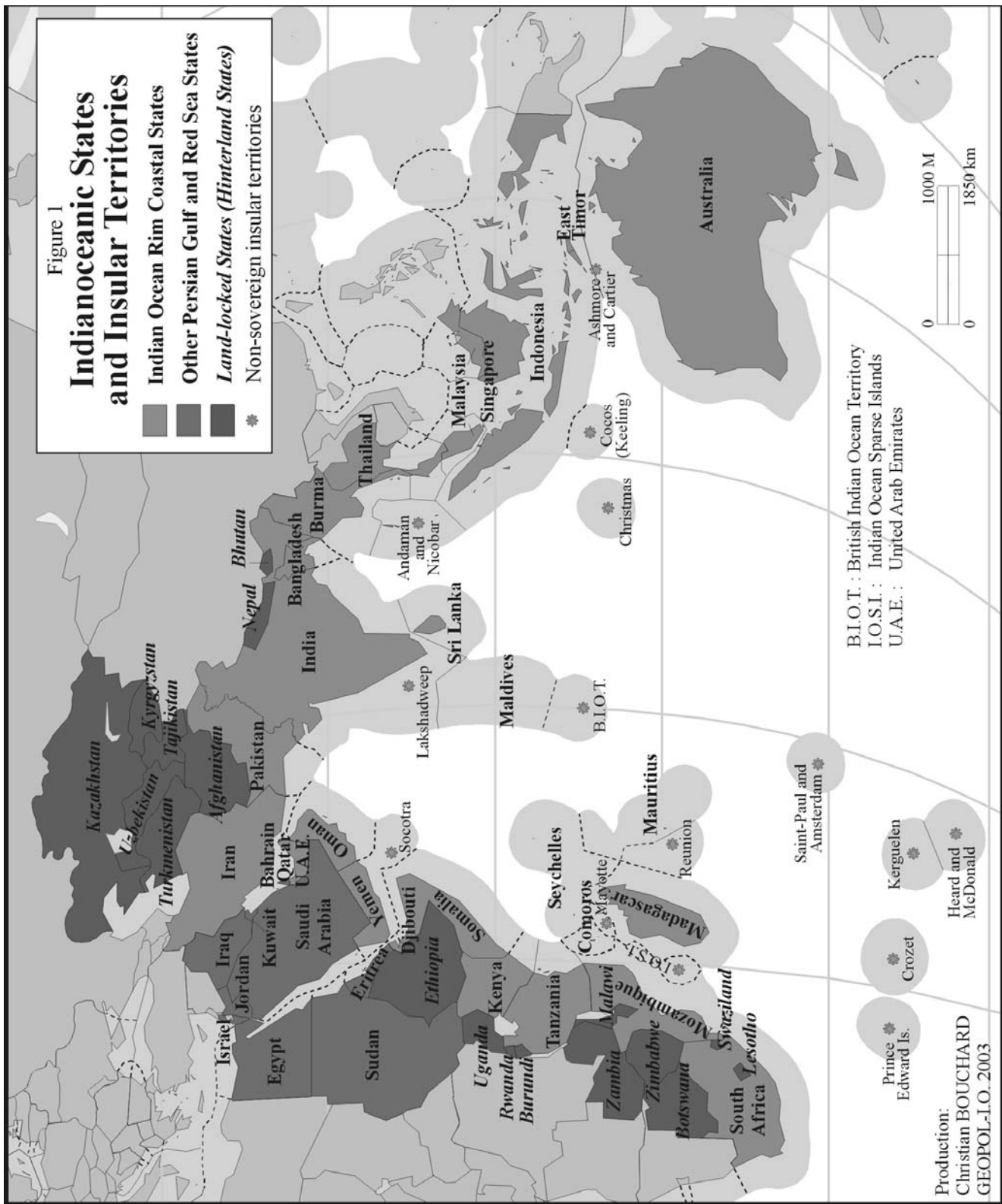
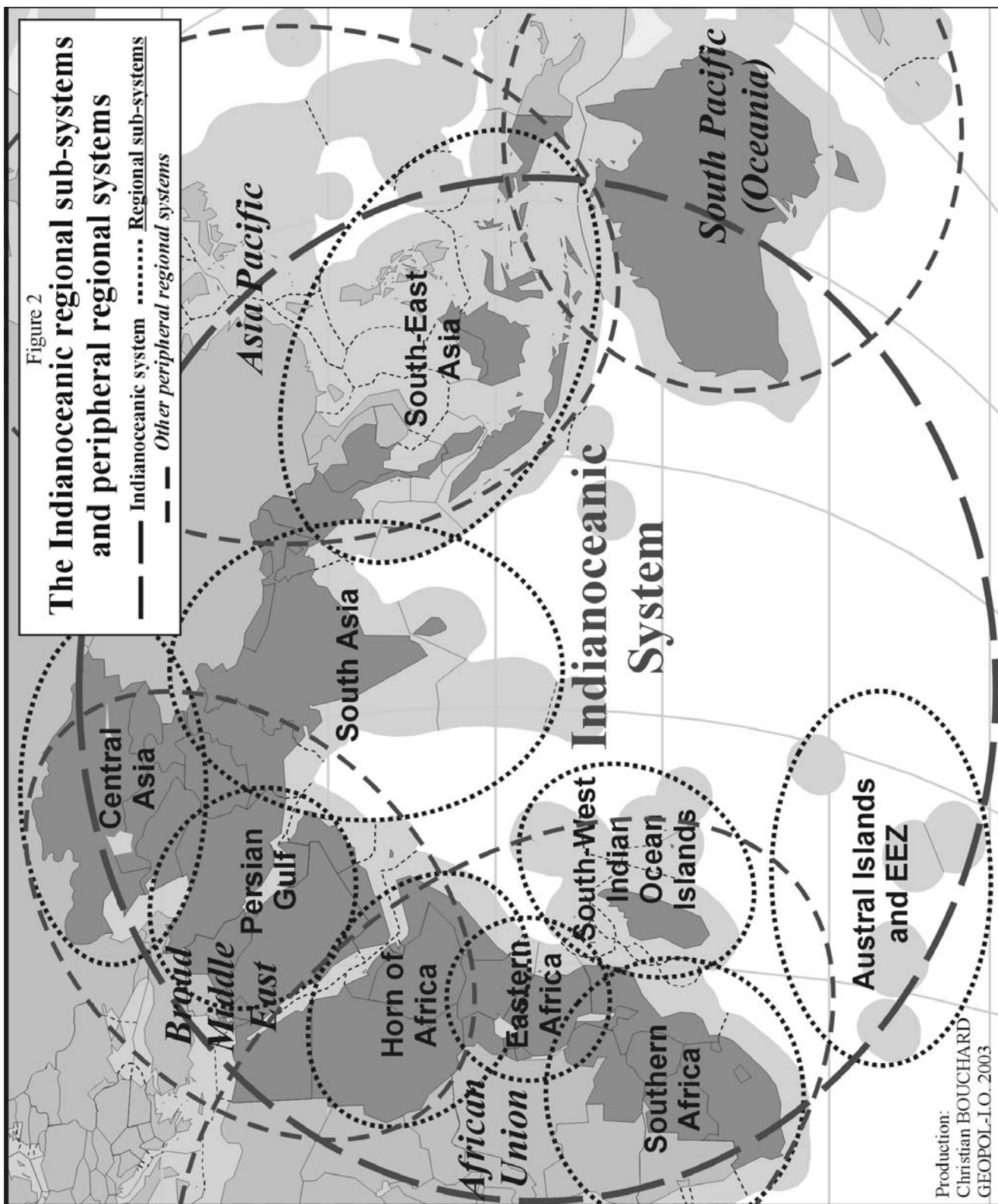


Figure 2

# The Indianoceanic regional sub-systems and peripheral regional systems

— Indianoceanic system ..... Regional sub-systems  
 - - - Other peripheral regional systems



Production:  
 Christian BOUCHARD  
 GEOPOL-I.O. 2003

