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The Indo-Pacific Region: a new area of cooperation between SA and the EU

Prepared by *Anthoni van Nieuwkerk*

Key messages

- * The Indo-Pacific (I-P) region covers all nations and islands surrounding the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.
- * It is a hub of global trade and commerce, and a potential source of prosperity for the countries in the region.
- * Both the EU and South Africa have strategic political, economic, and security interests in the I-P.
- * Both seek to cooperate with partners that share a similar approach to the I-P.
- * Like other nations and regions with interests in the I-P, Africa and South Africa should develop a strategy for promoting its political, economic, trade, environmental and security interests in the I-P
- * Academics should lead with research and analysis to inform and advise South African and African policy-makers on strategic matters relating to the I-P.

Background

On 12 September 2022, the Delegation of the EU to South Africa and the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa at Stellenbosch University co-hosted a hybrid Round Table on the Indo-Pacific Region. Its purpose was to focus attention on the Indo-Pacific region, and examine the motivations behind approaches to the region by the EU and Africa. This policy brief draws on the proceedings of the seminar, and identifies strategic areas of cooperation to be pursued by South Africa and the EU-South Africa partnership.

This Policy Brief is based on a Round Table held on 12 May 2022, co-hosted by the EU delegation in South Africa and the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa at Stellenbosch University.

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The Indo-Pacific Region: a new area for collaboration between SA and the EU

The Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific is a bio-geographic maritime region encompassing the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the seas connecting the two in the general area of Indonesia.

Geopolitically, the term covers all the coastal countries and islands surrounding the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, including India, South Africa, Japan, Russia, Australia, Canada and Mexico. In geographic terms, ASEAN countries are considered to be at the centre of the political Indo-Pacific.

Economically, the Indo-Pacific is a hub of global trade and commerce, and a potential source of prosperity. It accounts for 65 per cent of the world's population, 63 per cent of global GDP, and 46 per cent of global merchandise trade.

The value of the Indo-Pacific region for the EU

In 2021, the EU adopted an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.¹ The strategy document notes that the EU has a vital geopolitical and economic interest in the stability and prosperity of the I-P region. It also notes that the current global era is one of strategic rivalries and complex security threats, including in the I-P. Therefore, the EU has decided to step up its strategic engagement with the I-P region, including Africa.

Implementation of the strategy centres on seven priority areas: sustainable and inclusive prosperity, which includes trade and investments; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance in partnerships, including research and innovation; connectivity; security and defence; and human security.²

Finally, the strategy prioritises partnerships with countries and regional organisations. It states that the EU is willing to explore a relationship between itself and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and notes that adopting IORA as a dialogue partner would allow the EU to better understand the significance of the region from the I-P perspective through regular communications with members.

The value of the Indo-Pacific region for South Africa

South Africa is involved in global geopolitics from a trade, security, and environmental point of view, and it is essential to look at what is happening in the I-P and to consider how it impacts on Africa. Inter alia, Africa's security is tied up with the security of the I-P. For example, Operation Atalanta – which virtually halted piracy on the Horn of Africa, and ensured the safe passage of goods – was a highly successful collaboration between the EU, Africa and other partners. The Suez Canal accounts for about 12 per cent of global goods, and is a lifeline for Africa and the global community. The same is true for other 'choke points' in the I-P, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb or the Strait of Malacca; all are vital for ensuring the free movement of African goods, services and people.

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Major economies, both developed and developing, have produced Indo-Pacific strategies: 12 by countries, and two by regional organisations (the ASEAN and the EU). However, many of those strategies exclude Africa. This means that the continent is being marginalised in a rapidly evolving geostrategic construct, and it is vital for Africa to reverse this trend and form part of its architecture.

Furthermore, as much as Africa is being marginalised, it has been marginalising itself. Africa needs to place itself more prominently in the discussions around the I-P. For the past four years, South African diplomats have raised the matter at the highest national level. During South Africa's chairmanship of IORA in 2017–2019, it produced a discussion document indicating that IORA should include a position on the Indo-Pacific. The IORA vision or outlook was almost finalised. It was hoped that at the Council of Ministers meeting in Bangladesh in November 2022, an IORA position on the Indo-Pacific would be in place.

The realisation of the late Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's vision of a free, open, inclusive I-P depends not only on the actions of the I-P collective, but also on those of the global community. The global collective needs to act to ensure a multipolar I-P that is governed by international law, with multilateralism at its centre. The provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982³ should form part of the new architecture for the I-P. When IORA celebrated its 20th anniversary five years previously, members extended UN General Assembly Resolution (UNGAR) 2758 of 1971⁴ to include the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, thereby creating Resolution 2832.⁵

South and southern Africa are largely unprepared for climate disasters, at all levels of government. Recent floods and poor responses to them show why I-P collaboration would help South Africa to become more resilient in respect of climate change, build capacity, and address key issues in areas of trade. The I-P region is also vital for energy security. A major part of Africa's trade is tied to the I-P, and it is necessary to ensure a climate that facilitates the free movement of goods and services.

Connectivity and digitalisation are other key areas for collaboration. Africa accounts for 3 per cent of global e-commerce, amounting to about US\$16 billion. When the container vessel Ever Given got stuck in the Suez Canal in March 2022, it resulted in trade losses of more than \$9 billion per day. The oil spill in Mauritius in July 2020 devastated marine life, denoting that illegal and unregulated fishing is another urgent area for collaboration. Although 38 of 55 African countries are coastal, Africa does not have the capacity to police its marine resources, or benefit fully from the oceans.

Some governments wish to militarise the Indo-Pacific, which would compromise global security. The ocean presents vast opportunities for mutual prosperity and for addressing challenges of poverty, underdevelopment and inequality, in South Africa, on the African continent and in the Global South. Security challenges that need to be addressed as a collective include soft security issues, requiring policy planners, and hard security issues requiring soldiers, notably the illicit trafficking of narcotics, people and wildlife. The EU has formed a partnership with South Africa to address those challenges, and the architecture for collaboration is in place.

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South African relations with the EU relating to the I-P

The first formal engagement between South Africa and another country or region on the I-P was with the EU. Negotiations on a Trade Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) started soon after 1994. They were completed in 1999, and the agreement was signed in 2004. Two years later, EU Commissioner Louis Michel visited President Thabo Mbeki and presented him with a draft agreement that elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership. The agreement was signed in 2007, and the first summit was held in Bordeaux in July 2008, co-chaired by Presidents Mbeki and Sarkozy. The initial TDCA outlined five areas of cooperation. Presently, under the strategic partnership, the EU and South Africa cooperate on more than 20 policy sectors. Therefore, there is already an architecture in place for cooperation, and the EU is a natural partner.

The existing architecture between South Africa and the EU, the EU and SADC and the EU and Africa can be harnessed in an approach to the I-P. Europe drew South Africa into a free trade agreement, and could also pull Africa into attending to the I-P.

Conclusion

Both the EU and South Africa have strategic economic, political and security interests in the I-P. Both seek to cooperate with partners that share a similar approach to the I-P. Cooperation between South Africa, Africa and the EU on the I-P can build on the shared values of democracy, human rights, international law, and regional peace and stability. Areas of commonality include:

Green transition and energy security.

Energy is a key issue in South Africa, which has experienced energy shortfalls for the past 15 years. The war in Ukraine has brought the importance of energy security into stark relief, as illustrated by inflation, interest rate hikes, and the rising cost of energy and other products. The war also highlights the contrast between efforts to move towards greener alternatives on the one hand, and attempts to secure the continued supply of fossil fuels on the other. Energy security is an important issue for South Africa and the world, and is reflected in the EU strategies on both Africa and the I-P.

Digital partnerships and transformation

The fourth industrial revolution is under way, and Africa can either adapt and 'leap-frog', or get left behind. Technology is a priority area that offers a pathway for collaboration, information-sharing and technology-sharing which could improve livelihoods and provide access to vital goods and services.

Sustainable and inclusive growth

National interest is a driving force of foreign policy. South Africa faces many socio-economic challenges, which can be distilled down to the need to achieve far higher rates of economic growth. Economic growth is a central to South Africa's national interest, and foreign policy must be shaped accordingly. This creates an additional platform and area for partnership.

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The Indo-Pacific Region: a new area for collaboration between SA and the EU

Security and defence

The continent of Africa faces many challenges as well. There are many choke points, security issues and potential flashpoints for future conflict in the I-P. Collective interests depend on the flow of trade, economic growth, and general wellbeing. In terms of a security partnership, there is already a sound platform in place and foundation upon which to build, which was of mutual interest to both Africa and the EU, vis-à-vis the I-P.

Proposals

- * South Africa needs to provide thought leadership on the I-P, and make use of opportunities to create a formal network or platform for collaboration. The hybrid round table represented the beginning of new academic research about the I-P.
- * To reinforce this point, EU and South African officials at the seminar appealed to African academics to produce more outputs on the I-P, including contributions to the development of a South African or African strategy paper.⁶
- * Africa already possesses the basic building blocks for crafting an Indo-Pacific strategy and vision, notably the African Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIMS 2050),⁷ the Decade of African Seas and Oceans 2015–2025,⁸ and Agenda 2063.⁹ Those building blocks already incorporate key areas such as peace and security, trade and investment, and digitisation and connectivity. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹⁰ also shape Africa's collaboration with the world, as does the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).¹¹
- * A trilateral research or study group could be established in which South African and African scholars, EU scholars and I-P-based scholars could engage on trends and events within the I-P region, and contribute to African responses and positions on the matter.
- * As regards South African foreign policy, it is important to focus on the I-P as a geopolitical region of importance. It is unclear how Africa conceptualises or locates itself within the I-P. It sees itself as part of IORA and the western Indian Ocean, but sees the area beyond that as Asia. The I-P, as a construct, allows a broader look at the region. Once Africa centres itself within that construct, it will become possible for South Africa to play an important role as a gateway to Africa and an interlocutor for the region, and it will be well placed to take up the opportunities on offer for collaboration and cooperation in the I-P.
- * The EU, South Africa and other like-minded countries could revisit resolution UNGAR 2832 and extend it beyond the Indian Ocean to declare the I-P as a zone of peace.
- * The EU and SA should explore and promote a relationship between the EU and IORA. Adopting IORA as a dialogue partner would allow the EU to better understand the significance of the region from the I-P perspective, through regular communications with members.

While the NRA has been good at gathering stakeholders to identify key elements of desired reforms, efforts to engage all citizens must continue as a priority.

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- * The position of the United States on the I-P will soon include Africa, and the US-Africa summit due to be held in Washington on 13-15 December provides an opportunity for facilitating this inclusion. If Africa does not raise the I-P at the summit, the United States should do so.
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ENDNOTES

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About the author

Anthoni van Nieuwkerk is Professor of International and Diplomacy Studies in the Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs at the University of South Africa.