

BREAKING THE SURFACE: EXPLORING AND ILLUMINATING OCEAN REGIONS

By Prof. Maxi Schoeman and Daniela Marggraff || 5 February 2024

When presented with a map of the world, most people instinctively focus on continents and countries, prioritising the land over the seemingly empty spaces of the sea. In fact, Peters writes that “the eye is trained to look at the land [...] not that which surrounds it: the seemingly empty space of the sea”. The oceans are thus reduced to blue, flat, static, and unchanging spaces – empty voids that connect the spaces that ‘actually’ matter, namely the land. The land is prioritised over the ocean, since land can be more easily developed, grouped into states, and provide settlement for humans, as opposed to the ocean, which due to its aqueous and fluid nature, is written off beyond society. The ocean has a secondary status; the land is the space of society while the oceans are little more than zones of exchange.

Importantly, even when the ocean has been considered in studies, it has been seen mainly as a space to be traversed. Literature that focuses on stories about explorers traveling across seas predominantly focuses on life aboard the ship and fails to recognise and acknowledge that which transpires beyond the ship in the sea waters. In this sense, the conceptualisation of the ocean has been mostly one-dimensional, ignoring the actual three-dimensional nature of the sea. Studying the oceans needs to consider not only that which happens ‘on’ the sea, but also that which happens ‘in’ and ‘under’ the sea.

The importance of this was demonstrated in 2002 during the naval exercises – Neo Tapon – conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Spanish navy in the Atlantic between Gibraltar and the Canaries. While initially appearing as routine multinational exercises among allies, it resulted in unintended consequences as noise pollution led to the beaching of ten beaked whales. Despite initial denials attributing the whales' deaths to the military sonar equipment used during the drills, a subsequent study by veterinary pathologists showed that the whales perished due to attempting to escape rapidly from the disruptive 'pin' noise emitted by the sonar. Concerningly, between 2014 and 2019, underwater noise has increased twofold in European waters specifically, primarily driven by the surge in shipping activities. Even the Ukraine-Russia conflict has left its mark on marine life, contributing to a massive increase in dolphin strandings in the Black Sea between February and August 2022. Other recent developments that relate to events happening beneath the surface include Norway becoming the first country to support the controversial practice of deep-sea bed mining. Such developments call for the urgent need to explore the ocean in its three-dimensional nature.

Taking this as a point of departure, the Ocean Regions Programme (ORP) endeavours in 2024, to take seriously Steinberg's plea that studies “of ocean regions should consider how they are ‘filled’” and account for a three-dimensional understanding of ocean regions. It does this with the simultaneous aim of depicting ocean regions as much more than just secondary regions that connect landmasses. With this in mind, the ORP will publish a series of research briefs that aim to ‘tour’ the different ocean regions, including (but not limited to) regions such as the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Antarctic and the Arctic. Each respective research brief (to be published monthly) will illuminate the specified ocean region in a manner that accounts for the three-dimensional nature of oceans.

The objective is to demonstrate how ocean regions are constructed and informed by processes that take place on the ocean, under the ocean, in the ocean, and also on the land. Ocean regions are constructed by processes that are ‘more-than-human’. It involves consideration of the manner in which, as Steinberg further explains, oceans are produced and reproduced by scientists, sailors, fishers, passengers, divers, and politicians, to name a few, as they interact with both human and non-human elements. Considering this, research briefs and op-eds will also be published that focus on the interplay between pertinent global events that are happening and how these impact the oceans.

From a local perspective, 2024 is an important year for South Africa since it marks 10 years since the initiation of Operation Phakisa. Launched in 2014, Operation Phakisa, meaning 'hurry up' in Sesotho, aimed to accelerate the harnessing of the vast potential within South Africa's untapped oceans. Within this context, a further aim of the ORP is to engage with the topic of South Africa and her maritime interests. This includes exploring some of the challenges and opportunities for South Africa as it relates to the ocean and geopolitical trends being shaped by, and shaping, ocean regions. The country is moving into a particularly important period regarding its maritime interests and the Ocean Region Programme's first seminar of 2024, presented by Tim Walker of the Institute for Security Studies, focused on this aspect, arguing for the necessity for South Africa of clearly defining its maritime interests and strategy. This becomes of particular importance in the context of the continuing serious challenges experienced at the country's ports and in view of some of its neighbours now preferring to use the ports of Lobito or Walvis Bay as preferred export terminals.

Apart from taking stock of the first decade of Operation Phakisa, South Africa is entering its preparation for assuming the G20 presidency from Brazil in 2025, who in turn took over the presidency from India. South Africa's tenure will mark the fourth consecutive presidency by a developing country and the third consecutive presidency by a BRICS member state. Consequently, it presents a significant opportunity to build on the momentum generated by other developing nations advocating for a greater focus on global economic governance within the G20. However, before South Africa can assume the G20 presidency it will first have to hold what may amount to its most unpredictable national elections since the end of Apartheid. South Africa is not the only country heading to the polls; in fact, 2024 has been dubbed by some as the 'super-election year' or the 'Super Bowl of elections', considering that 49 percent of the world population, in more than 50 countries, will be voting in national elections.

Notably and in addition to South Africa, several of the BRICS members will be holding elections, such as Iran, India and Russia. Apart from this, the US will also be hosting elections which could potentially see Trump heading for a second presidency which is causing widespread concern. The fact that so many countries will be voting is significant, as such occasions often generate national, regional and even global unpredictability.

Another important oceans-related issue that will require South African leadership in the next two years, is its election to the chair of the Djibouti Code of Conduct steering committee, aimed at suppressing and eliminating crimes against ships in the Western Indian Ocean region. On the Atlantic seaboard, something to be watched is the recently announced US-lead Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, which includes BRICS member Brazil, as well as SADC member, Angola. South Africa, a bi-oceanic country, straddling both the Indian and the Atlantic oceans, with a level of responsibility also for the Southern Ocean, will increasingly be called upon to play a leading role in global ocean governance, be this in the realm of geopolitical competition, or in the domain of ocean conservation. 2024 promises to be an interesting and challenging year for the country's leadership and the Ocean Regions Programme hopes to bring regular analysis and evaluation of these opportunities and challenges.

Notes

This Op-ed was compiled by Professor Maxi Schoeman and Daniela Marggraff within the context of the Ocean Regions Research Programme of the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

