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Indo-US Militarisation of Western Indian Ocean – Implications for Pakistan

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Key Points:

- After the passage of National Defence Authorisation Act for Fiscal Year (NDAA) 2020, the Defence Department will need to expand the Area of Responsibility (AoR) of US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), thereby, fully incorporating Indian Ocean waters within its fold. Such massive geostrategic revisions will take considerable time to materialise and might prove financially and operationally risky.
- An important aspect of the US dependability on India is to make up for the former's limited naval presence in Africa.
- Indian strategic analysts are very clear about their core concerns in the Indian Ocean, citing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's growing presence and Pakistan Navy's expanding submarine fleet to justify maritime assertiveness
- Washington's new "Western Indian Ocean" construct will mostly impact existing allies under the US Central Command AoR.
- Pakistan will also face significant geostrategic challenges, most importantly a looming shadow of Indian Navy aggression in the Arabian Sea.
- In the current environment, the only deterrent to expansionist Indo-US maritime coordination in East Africa/Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is the PLA Navy Support Base in Djibouti, close to US Navy's Camp Lemonnier.
- Pakistan cannot rely on China alone to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Islamabad will have to scrap its irrational policy of thinking within the confines of North Arabian Sea and switch to maritime security policymaking from a continental perspective.
- If the future maritime operating environment in WIO is dominated by India through persistent American patronage, it will disrupt Pakistan's strategic stability paradigm thereby prompting the nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean.

According to the United Nations, the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) comprises 10 continental and island states: Comoros, France (Reunion), Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa and Tanzania.¹

¹ Dr. David Obura, "REVIVING THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN ECONOMY: Actions for a Sustainable Future," World Wide Fund for Nature International, last modified January 2017, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/13692WWF2.pdf>.

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The region has become the focus of an increased US geostrategic interest. In September 2019, the US Senate passed a bill (S. 1790) cited as the National Defence Authorisation Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (NDAA 2020) which incorporated enhanced amendments to improvise existing Indo-US strategic ties. Section 1250 modifies Section 1292 (a) (2) of NDAA 2017 by necessitating the development of an enhanced Indo-US framework in the Western IOR to take stock of:

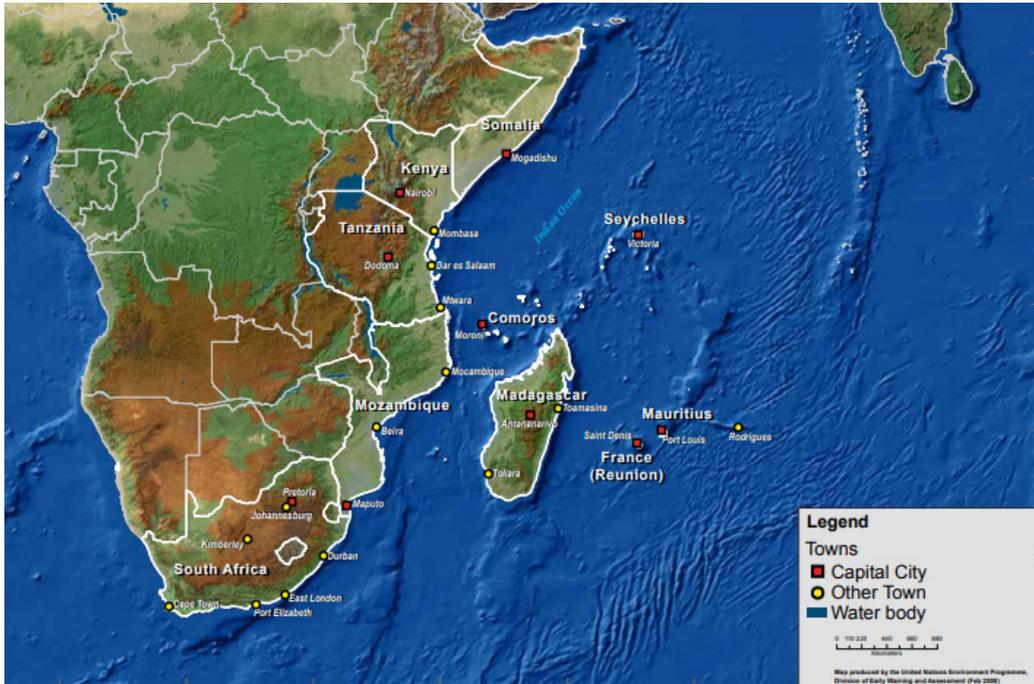


Figure 1: The Western Indian Ocean Region

- Military activities of the US and India conducted separately in the WIO
- General/on-going military cooperation between the US and India in humanitarian assistance, counter terrorism, counter piracy, maritime security and other areas the Defence Secretary considers appropriate
- Describing Indo-US military coordination in WIO through relevant US geographic combatant commands (Africa, Central and Indo-Pacific Commands)

A key takeaway from the amendments is that “Western Indian Ocean” is uniquely defined as “the area in the Indian Ocean extending from the west coast of India to the east coast of Africa”.² Essentially, the US lawmakers have broadened the existing scope of WIO as prescribed by the United Nations. This generates a dilemma for the existing geographic groupings employed by the Department of Defence. Apart from the standard 10 countries of WIO, the new definition subsumes countries



Figure 2: Author’s marking of Western IOR marked in yellow on a raw map by Encyclopedia Britannica based on NDA 2020’s description

² “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020,” *Congress.gov*, last modified September 17, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/s1790/BILLS-116s1790eah.pdf>.

along the entire East Africa belt and Arab Gulf as also Iran and Pakistan.

The existing Area of Responsibility (AoR) for US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) spans the entire North and South Pacific Oceans on the right and the Indian Ocean just before the India's maritime border with Pakistan to the west. Presently, WIO is the body of water from Pakistan at the north till the Arab Gulf under the US Central Command (USCENTCOM). The water below Arabian Sea is part of the US Africa Command (USAFRICOM).

After the passage of NDAA 2020, the Defence Department will need to expand the AoR of USINDOPACOM, thereby, fully incorporating Indian Ocean waters within its fold. Such massive geostrategic revisions will take considerable time to materialise and might prove financially and operationally risky. Washington will most likely formulate a trilateral framework to manage Western IOR through calibrated management amongst theatre staff at USAFRICOM, USCENTCOM and USINDOPACOM. Irrespective of the orientation, the amendment to declare all waters west of India as "Western Indian Ocean" will not only incur significant lags on account of competing interests among respective combatant commands but also complicate relations with member states in different zones creating an atmosphere of severe military-diplomatic confusion.

India's defence establishment found an opportunity during these developments. In March 2018, Defence Secretary Sanjay Mitra visited Washington to discuss operationalising the coordination with Japan in the larger Indo-Pacific context. India and the US agreed upon tri-service amphibious exercises off India's coast including Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI).³ One of the monumental outcomes of this visit was India's desire to depute a Naval Defence Attaché in Bahrain who would double-up as India's representative in the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT).⁴ However, as of yet, New Delhi is yet to appoint one.⁵

It could be possible that Bahrain's government may have resisted the idea on Pakistan's insistence. Whatever the reasons behind the delay may be, the fact that Washington accepted New Delhi's desire to attain

visibility of NAVCENT speaks volumes about the former's desperation to appease the latter for long-term strategic gains. It also confirms that India's self-proclaimed status as the "net security provider" in IOR is being supported through thick and thin.⁶

An important aspect of the US dependability on India is to make up for the former's limited naval presence in Africa. The AoR of US Naval Forces Europe-Naval Forces Africa (USNAVEUR-NAVAF) covers approximately half of the Atlantic Ocean from the North Pole to Antarctica as well as the Adriatic, Baltic, Barents, Black, Caspian, Mediterranean, and North Seas but it is headquartered in Naples, Italy and largely focuses on operations along West and North Africa.

USAFRICOM's Combined Task Force-Horn of Africa (CTF-HOA) in Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti (East Africa) is the only US military base in the entire African continent. No more than 4,000 personnel are deputed there on rotation at any given time, mostly comprising contractors or personnel mandated with base operations responsibilities (non-combatant).⁷ It is logical therefore, for the US, to make up for its lack of force credibility in East Africa/WIO through partnerships with like-minded (read: anti-China) countries.



Figure 3: The CTF-HOA logo shows AOR covering Arabian/Persian Gulf and East African waters

Despite its oft-asserted claims of being "non-aligned," New Delhi is very much adamant to cash on this weak US military presence in East Africa. Recently, External Affairs Minister and former Foreign Secretary Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, considered the doyen of India's "Act East" Policy, discussed the idea of a WIO version of Indo-Pacific concept incorporating the Arabian Sea, Arab Gulf, and Africa.⁸ In parallel to its coordination

³ Shishir Gupta, "Soon, India Defence Attaché At US Navy Bahrain Command," *Hindustan Times*, last modified March 21, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/soon-india-defence-attache-at-us-navy-bahrain-command/story-iTGpB5sLbOlod11MlprWjl.html>.

⁴ Sandeep Unnithan, "Exclusive: We Can Match China In The Indian Ocean Region, Says Navy Chief Sunil Lanba," *India Today*, last modified November 17, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/interview/story/20181126-we-can-match-china-in-the-indian-ocean-region-admiral-sunil-lanba-1388904-2018-11-17>.

⁵ "Embassy Officials," *Embassy of India Bahrain*, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://eoi.gov.in/bahrain/?2720?000>.

⁶ "India As A Net Security-Provider In The Indian Ocean And Beyond," *Center for International Maritime Security*, last modified April 29, 2016, http://cimsec.org/india-net-security-provider-indian-ocean-beyond/24807#_ftnref9.

⁷ "Hillary Clinton Says In Memoir That There's Very Little U.S. Military Presence In Africa," *Politifact*, last modified June 12, 2014, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/jun/12/hillary-clinton/hillary-clinton-says-memoir-theres-very-little-us/>.

⁸ Indrani Bagchi, "India Expands Indo-Pacific Policy," *Times of India*, last modified December 15, 2019, https://m.timesofindia.com/india/india-expands-indo-pacific-policy/amp_articleshow/72644806.cms.

with the US, the Indian government is banking heavily on a separate geostrategic partnership with Japan viz the Asia Africa Growth Corridor and Maritime Security and Safety Initiative to set a strong foothold in Africa via Djibouti as a counter-balance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁹ The Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF) already maintains an overseas base in Djibouti.¹⁰



Figure 4: Planned Route of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor

Indian strategic analysts are very clear about their core concerns in the Indian Ocean, citing the PLA Navy's growing presence and Pakistan Navy's expanding submarine fleet to justify maritime assertiveness.¹¹ The confluence of two Quad allies (US and Japan) in Djibouti presents a buffer through which New Delhi can find the space to fast-track economic diplomacy through projects such as SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region).¹² The objective is to employ economic influence to circumvent China's growing infrastructural



Figure 5: India's Sagar Initiative
(Source: Gateway House, 2016)

⁹ Eijas Ariffin, "India Seeks To Counterbalance Chinese Geopolitical Ambitions," *The ASEAN Post*, last modified January 28, 2018, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/india-seeks-counterbalance-chinese-geopolitical-ambitions-0>.

¹⁰ Daniel Di Santo, "Japanese Military to Expand Base in Djibouti," *The Trumpet*, last modified November 26, 2018, <https://www.thetrumpet.com/17965-japanese-military-to-expand-base-in-djibouti>.

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Dhiraj Kumar, "Indian Ocean Region (IOR) : India As a Net Security Provider- The Way Ahead – USI," *The United Service Institution of India*, last modified April-June 2019, <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/indian-ocean-region-ior-india-as-a-net-security-provider-the-way-ahead/>.

¹² Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, "Sagarmala Or SAGAR: A Maritime Dilemma - Gateway House," *Gateway House*, 2019, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/sagarmala-or-sagar-our-maritime-dilemma/>.

investments such as those in Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, considered a red flag.¹³

In April 2019, participants of a Track II Dialogue on Accelerating the Momentum of Defence and Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific led by Indian Army Brigadier (Retired) Arun Sahgal, a renowned expert in Net Assessments, asserted that Beijing should be convinced about Indo-US plans to counter China's maritime clout in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁴ Noteworthy specific recommendations to enhance in-theatre operational cooperation include the following:

- India and the US should conduct high-end exercises as a means of strategic signalling and optics. Such exercises should enhance US-India defence cooperation in the Indian Ocean in maritime security, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and humanitarian assistance and should expand the geographic scope of Malabar to include joint military activities between relevant US commands and the Indian military in the Western Indian Ocean. Both countries also should consider launching a new amphibious exercise involving France and Australia in the USINDOPACOM or USCENCOM AoRs.
- The Government of India should consider negotiating a memorandum of understanding between Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) and the appropriate counterpart Indian operational fleet to build an institutional and operational relationship. Such a relationship would include networking existing maritime operations such as the Indian Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to the combined maritime forces and NAVCENT, as well as appropriate counterparts in Singapore, Hawaii, and US Naval Forces Europe (NAVEUR).¹⁵
- Both governments should employ international liaison officers in a more robust manner. India should place a liaison officer in PACFLT and host a US liaison officer at the IFC-IOR.
- The US government should consider establishing an Indian Ocean Squadron based in the US military base at Diego Garcia or expanding the Fifth Fleet to assume responsibility for the entire Indian Ocean. A secondary option is for both the United States and India to establish a Joint Task Force-Indian Ocean Region (JTF-IOR) that is based at Diego Garcia or another mutually agreed

¹³ P.K.Balachandran, "Doval's China obsession made India go for Sri Lanka regime change: Former Lanka defense secy," *The New Indian Express*, last modified March 27, 2017, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2017/mar/27/dovals-china-obsession-made-india-go-for-sri-lanka-regime-change-former-lanka-defense-secy-1586564.html>.

¹⁴ Aman Thakker & Arun Sahgal, "U.S.-India Maritime Security Cooperation," *Csis-Prod.S3.Amazonaws.Com*, last modified October 2019, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/191003_ThakkerSahgal_U.S.IndiaMaritime_v2.pdf?7Pafeh014kHJQH7ePRSQ3tupaTpxAeg1.

¹⁵ "The Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)," Jatin Verma, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://www.jatinverma.org/the-information-fusion-centre-indian-ocean-region-ifc-ior/>.

location.

To stay abreast of PLA Navy in WIO, the Indian Navy needs optimal Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) of the seas.

The IFC-IOR in Gurugram, just on the outskirts of New Delhi, is on its path to become a hub of multi-national MDA collaboration. India's NSA Ajit Doval even invited member states of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to benefit from its reporting.¹⁶ IORA is the only Indian Ocean forum officially endorsed and supported by the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹⁷ Pakistan and China both being non-members will remain excluded from future multi-national maritime security policymaking in the Indian Ocean.

As far as anti-submarine ISR is concerned, the US is pushing India to purchase four additional P8-I aircrafts which will be delivered in 2020 and boost existing maritime surveillance capabilities.¹⁸



Figure 6: East African and Indian Ocean Littoral Countries
(Source: Indian Ocean Rim Association)

Some analysts propose that IFC-IOR should network with existing regional mechanisms such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct Network (DCoCN), Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), Madagascar and Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), Seychelles to develop inter-operable procedures.¹⁹ Defence and economic partnerships with East African and Indian Ocean littoral countries can help anchor New

¹⁶ "Indian Maritime Information Center Starts Working," Aa.Com.Tr, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indian-maritime-information-center-starts-working/1604910>.

¹⁷ "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision," US Department of State, last modified November 4, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

¹⁸ <https://defenceupdate.in/indian-navy-get-4-submarine-hunters-us-2020/>

¹⁹ Abhishek Mishra, "India-Africa Maritime Cooperation: The Case of Western Indian Ocean," *Observer Research Foundation*, last modified November 2019, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ORF_OccasionalPaper_221_India-Africa-Maritime.pdf.

Delhi's aspiration to secure unfettered influence over the WIO and complement the US efforts through Africa Partnership Station.²⁰

Washington's new "Western Indian Ocean" construct will mostly impact existing allies under the USCENTCOM AoR. Pakistan will also face significant geostrategic challenges, most importantly a looming shadow of Indian Navy aggression in the Arabian Sea. Logic necessitates that if a trilateral working regime for WIO is developed between the three relevant American combatant commands, Pakistan should push for the deputation of a liaison officer in USINDOPACOM or USNAF.

There are discussions in India about emulating the US and Chinese model of theaterised commands.²¹ In the context of appointing a Chief of Defence Staff, India can complete its own theaterisation process of the armed forces within a decade. Combined integration of air, land, and sea assets on the western seaboard would prove highly threatening for Pakistan's economic and security interests. In a future scenario, it will be India exercising its "String of Pearls" around China in WIO, not the other way around.²²

Earlier this year, naval forces from US Navy's 7th Fleet and India's Eastern Naval Command practiced "submarine hunting" around the secretive Diego Garcia base involving maritime patrol aircraft, destroyers and patrol vessels sending a strong signal to China.²³ In the revised context, India can be engaged in exercises with counterparts in the 5th Fleet (through Western Naval Command) and 6th Fleet (through Southern Naval Command) as well. Essentially, all three of India's naval geographic commands will be capable of inter-operability with the US. While Diego Garcia is currently the only US military base in the IOR, it is plausible that India will be asked to upgrade its existing military infrastructure in Lakshadweep & Minicoy Islands for future deployment of American naval forces.²⁴

²⁰ "Africa Partnership Station," *United States Africa Command*, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/security-cooperation/africa-partnership-station>.

²¹ Brigadier (Dr.) Rajeev Bhutani, "INTEGRATED THEATRE COMMANDS FOR THE INDIAN ARMED FORCES," Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, accessed December 30, 2019, https://cenjows.gov.in/upload_images/pdf/8.%20Bhutanui-Integrated%20Theatre%20Commands%20for%20India.pdf.

²² Rob Edens, "India Crafts Its Own 'String Of Pearls' To Rival China'S Naval Jewels," *South China Morning Post*, last modified March 23, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2138327/india-crafts-its-own-string-pearls-rival-chinas-naval-jewels>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Lakshadweep, Sagar Mala and India'S Own 'String Of Pearls,'" *Zaki Khalid's Commentary*, last modified November 9, 2017, <https://zkhaldpk.wordpress.com/2017/11/09/lakshadweep-sagar-mala-and-indias-own-string-of-pearls/>.



Figure 7: Marking of the Proximity between Gwadar in North Arabian Sea and Minicoy Island in the Southern Part

In the current environment, the only deterrent to expansionist Indo-US maritime coordination in East Africa/WIO is the PLA Navy Support Base in Djibouti,

close to US Navy's Camp Lemonnier. Although Beijing insists that the base is primarily a logistics support facility for counter-piracy forces in the Gulf of Aden, it is reasonably proffered that the strategic intent is to safeguard the rising power's economic interests such as Maritime Silk Route (MSR).²⁵

It remains to be seen how Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Indian Ocean littorals react to Washington's growing fondness for WIO. Pakistan's diminished influence in the Arab Gulf will prove ineffective in countering India's acceptance as a regional maritime watchdog especially when the Arabs are in dire need of American military assurances against what they perceive is a belligerent Iran. Economic constraints will likely discourage the US from setting up a dedicated naval headquarters in Africa. It would be more prudent to outsource specific naval activities to their counterparts in New Delhi.

Pakistan cannot rely on China alone to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Islamabad will have to scrap its irrational policy of thinking within the confines of North Arabian Sea and switch to maritime security policymaking from a continental perspective. Whether Pakistan accepts it or not, the future of Pakistan's national security is directly affected by the evolving concepts and developments tied to American understanding of the WIO. The longer Pakistan ignores the necessity of a continental outlook in the region, the more options it will limit for itself.

²⁵ Laura Zhou, "China Widens Reach As Troops Head To Base In Djibouti," *South China Morning Post*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2102422/china-sends-troops-military-base-djibouti-widening>.

The only sea-facing country except Pakistan directly impacted negatively in WIO will be Iran. In the developing regional circumstances, Tehran is orienting itself closer to Beijing in accordance with its 25-year strategic cooperation roadmap and support for BRI/MSR. Military exercises between Iran, China and Russia have already kicked-off, in which Pakistan was also invited.^{26 27} The long-term outlook suggests Pakistan and Iran's interests will converge further through the BRI pivot.

If the future maritime operating environment in WIO is dominated by India through persistent American patronage, it will disrupt Pakistan's strategic stability paradigm thereby prompting the nuclearisation of the Indian Ocean. High-intensity standoffs and conflict currently settled on land will also take place on the seas.

To prevent this undesirable confrontational scenario, Indian Ocean littorals will have to play their due role and discourage militarised grouping directed against a specific country or connectivity project. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 2832 (XXVI) adopted on 16th December 1971 designated the Indian Ocean as a "zone of peace".²⁸ Great powers were called upon by UNGA to enter into consultations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean to halt the further escalation of military presence including bases, installations and logistics/supply facilities and nuclear weapons. It also guarantees that:

- Warships and military aircraft would not use the Indian Ocean for any threat or use of force against any littoral or hinterland state
- The right to free and unimpeded use of the zone by the vessels of all nations would be ensured
- An international agreement would be reached for the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace.

Washington's new definition of "Western Indian Ocean" may appear as a minor legislative amendment but for regional stakeholders like Pakistan, it represents the imposition by an extra-regional force of a law which fundamentally violates various United Nations resolutions and encourages a conventional-cum-nuclear build-up in the high seas.

²⁶ "Iran Presents 25-Year Roadmap For Strategic Ties With China," *Financial Tribune*, last modified August 26, 2019, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/99602/iran-presents-25-year-roadmap-for-strategic-ties-with-china>.

²⁷ "Iran Invites Pakistan To Take Part In Maritime Security Drill," *Tasnim News Agency*, last modified December 10, 2019, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2019/12/10/2157192/iran-invites-pakistan-to-take-part-in-maritime-security-drill>.

²⁸ "Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace," in *United Nations Disarmament Yearbook 1983*, United Nations, New York, <https://doi.org/10.18356/7e9a3a5a-en>.