



AFRICA, THE UNITED STATES AND GEOECONOMICS OF THE SEAS, CONTINUING PROF MAXI SCHOEMAN'S LEGACY

BEYOND THE GRANT

The Student Representative Chamber (SRC) at the University of Pretoria's Hatfield Campus became a hub of global dialogue as scholars, diplomats, naval officers, and students gathered for the conference Africa, the United States, and Geoeconomics of the Seas. Hosted by the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS-UP) and the Ocean Regions Programme in the Department of Political Sciences and proudly supported by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) and the South African BRICS Think Tank, the event explored how oceans, power, and politics intersect in a rapidly changing world.

For the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), this project carries a particular emotional weight. The oceans workstream was conceptualised and championed by the late Prof Maxi Schoeman, whose intellectual curiosity and institutional commitment shaped ACSUS-UP and inspired a generation of students. Several presenters spoke movingly of how, shortly before her passing, Prof Schoeman handed over her research files with a characteristic instruction to "go and do something with it." This conference was, in many ways, that "something": a living tribute in which her students and collaborators extended the questions she cared about into new waters.



SOUTH AFRICAN
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HONOURING PROF MAXI SCHOEMAN

The Africa, the United States and Geoeconomics of the Seas conference is deeply rooted in the intellectual legacy of the late Professor Maxi Schoeman, who conceptualised and led the Ocean Regions Programme until her untimely passing. Prof Schoeman was Professor Emeritus in International Relations at the University of Pretoria, where she also served as Head of the Department of Political Sciences and as Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics in the Faculty of Humanities.

She specialised in foreign policy, security studies, and Africa's position within global systems, with particular focus on BRICS and the geopolitics of the seas. She engaged with the South African BRICS Think Tank (SABTT) through research partnerships and scholarly contributions. She also held a Visiting Chair at King's College, London. Her many publications include guest-editing Strategic Review for Southern Africa and co-authoring chapters with leading scholars such as Prof Chris Alden.

Her research was marked by its insistence that Africa must speak for itself in the global arena, to challenge current realities, redefine the continent's agency, and position Africa as an equal voice in shaping world order. The continuation of the Ocean Regions Programme through this conference is thus not only an academic pursuit, but a living tribute to her life's work and passion.



Why the seas matter

The concept notes grounding the discussions reminded participants that maritime spaces are no longer peripheral to land world politics, they are central to it. Sea lanes of communication, submarine data cables, offshore energy, fisheries, and coastal tourism all sit at the intersection of geography, economics, and security. Africa and the United States each bring distinct histories and interests to this oceanic domain, from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to key chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb, Suez Canal, and Cape of Good Hope.

Against this backdrop, the conference asked: What does African agency look like in an era of contested sea lanes, climate crisis, and great-power rivalry? And how can African scholarship shape the rules governing oceans that carry our trade, our data, and, increasingly, our vulnerabilities?

HONOURING PROF MAXI SCHOEMAN

BRICS and Other External Actors in African Seas examined how China, the EU, Gulf states, and other powers are competing for influence in Africa's maritime zones, especially around critical minerals, ports, naval access, and subsea cables. The discussion underscored that Africa cannot afford to be merely a theatre of competition; it must be an active rule-maker.

Comparative Maritime Perspectives drew lessons from the Black Sea, Mediterranean, North and South Atlantic, and Indian Ocean. These cases illustrated how sanctions, conflict, migration routes, and energy corridors elsewhere ripple into African waters and shape our own strategic choices.



Poles and Planetary Commons took the discussion southwards to Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, a session that spoke directly to Prof Schoeman's fascination with polar politics. Presenters showed how krill, ice sheets, and ocean currents link Antarctic governance to African food security, climate resilience, and maritime law.

Technology, Environment, and Socio-Economic Spillovers explored AI at sea, maritime innovation, offshore energy, and environmental security. The recurring message was clear: without African capability in maritime technology, shipbuilding, and naval presence, the continent will struggle to govern its own blue economy or protect against illegal fishing, piracy, and cyber-maritime risks.

Running through many discussions was a strong Pan-African thread. Keynote inputs on the structural roots of Africa's trade, energy, and food deficits reminded the audience that dependency is not accidental; it is produced by rules on finance, trade, and intellectual property. Pan-African industrial policy, value-addition to critical minerals, and regional naval capacity were proposed as pathways for Africa to move from the bottom of the global hierarchy to the centre of a more just multipolar order.



KEY CONVERSATIONS AND EMERGING INSIGHTS

Over two intensive days, panels traced these questions across multiple scales:

Africa/US Maritime Strategies and Relations unpacked how shifting US attitudes towards multilateralism, from post-war institution building to "America First" bilateralism, are reshaping trade, security cooperation, and diplomacy.

Speakers highlighted how tariffs, the expiry of AGOA, and selective engagement with multilateral bodies are pushing African states to diversify markets, deepen intra-African trade, and strengthen instruments such as the AfCFTA.



STUDENTS CARRYING THE WORK FORWARD:

FROM MENTORSHIP TO IMPACT, THE NEXT GENERATION OF AFRICAN SCHOLARS BUILDS ON THE FOUNDATIONS LAID BY PROF MAXI SCHOEMAN.

In many ways, the most powerful dimension of the conference, particularly poignant after Prof Schoeman's passing, was the strong presence and confidence of emerging scholars. The group photo further reflects this shift, capturing a programme intentionally advancing transformation and redressing gender imbalances in the field. Masters and Doctoral students from South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and beyond presented on topics ranging from the Horn of Africa's maritime security to South Africa/US relations under shifting global orders.

Their panels were not side events; they were fully integrated into the programme, debated by senior academics, and linked to ongoing research projects. In this sense, the gathering was both an academic forum and a mentoring space, precisely the kind of intellectual community Prof Schoeman worked to build. The fact that her students are now leading panels on Antarctica, the Horn of Africa, and pan-African industrial strategy is a tangible measure of the project's success beyond the grant.



NIHSS IMPACT

The Africa, the United States and Geoeconomics of the Seas conference illustrates what NIHSS support is designed to do:

Resource ambitious, African-led research agendas that cut across political science, international law, economics, and environmental studies.

Create platforms where African voices speak with authority on questions that shape global rules from multilateral reform to the governance of the high seas.

Nurture a new cohort of scholars who are not only writing theses but also shaping policy debates and building networks with partners across the continent and globally.

The organisers are now working towards a set of conference outputs, including policy briefs for African decision-makers, teaching materials on the geoeconomics of the seas, and a possible edited volume that will carry Prof Schoeman's vision into classrooms, strategy rooms, and coastal communities.

For the NIHSS, this project is a reminder that our investments and support in the Humanities and Social Sciences travel far beyond a single grant cycle. They live on in institutions, in regional and global conversations, and in the work of scholars who, like Prof Maxi Schoeman and her students, insist that Africa must think for itself about the oceans that surround it.

In honouring her legacy, this conference did exactly what she asked: it "did something" with the research she left behind, and, in doing so, opened new horizons for African scholarship on the seas.



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