



Securing India's Interests in the Indian Ocean Region

This editorial is based on "[The Chagos Treaty and Indian Ocean Security](#)" which was published in The Hindu on 08/10/2024. The article brings into picture the strategic significance of the Chagos Archipelago's sovereignty transfer for India, highlighting opportunities for enhanced cooperation with Mauritius. It also points to the challenges posed by the continued US-UK military presence and China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region.

For Prelims: [Indian Ocean Region](#), [Chagos Archipelago](#), [INS Vikrant](#), [Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region](#), [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor](#), [String of Pearls](#), [India's "Act East"](#) and ["Neighbourhood First"](#), [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#), [Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure](#), [Cyclone Idai](#), [BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi](#), [Cyclone Remal](#), [Sagarmala programme](#).

For Mains: Significance of the Indian Ocean Region for India, Major Challenges that India Encounter in the Indian Ocean

The recent agreement between **Mauritius and the United Kingdom** to transfer sovereignty of the [Chagos Archipelago](#) represents a significant shift in the [Indian Ocean Region's](#) geopolitical landscape. This development presents both opportunities and challenges for India, given the archipelago's strategic location between **India and Mauritius**. With Mauritius gaining control, there are prospects for enhanced bilateral cooperation in maritime surveillance, resource exploitation, and development.

However, the continued **US-UK military presence on Diego Garcia** for the next 99 years complicates the situation. This long-term Western military footprint, alongside [China's rising influence in the region](#), requires India to carefully balance its relationships while safeguarding its interests and promoting stability in the Indian Ocean.

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What is the Significance of the Indian Ocean Region for India?

- **Strategic Maritime Security:** The Indian Ocean is crucial for India's maritime security, serving as a **buffer against potential threats** and a **pathway for projecting naval power**.
 - India's maritime doctrine emphasizes its role as a **"net security provider"** in the region.
 - The launch of **INS Vikrant**, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier in 2022, significantly boosts its naval capabilities.
 - There are **17 multilateral and 20 bilateral exercises** that the Navy conducts annually, demonstrating its commitment to maritime security.
 - The establishment of the **Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in 2018** further enhances India's maritime domain awareness and ability to coordinate regional security efforts.
- **Economic Lifeline:** **80% of India's external trade** and **90% of the energy trade** happens through these ocean lines.
 - Additionally, the Indian Ocean maritime trade routes are the **crucial supply chains managing almost 70% of the world's container traffic**.
 - The development of **deep-water ports like Vizhinjam in Kerala**, aims to capture more of the regional transshipment market in the Indian Ocean.
 - India's Blue Economy initiatives, projected to contribute about **4% to GDP**, focus on sustainable use of Indian ocean resources.
 - The **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** agreement in September 2023 further underscores the Indian Ocean's role in India's economic aspirations.
- **Energy Security:** India heavily relies on the Indian Ocean for its energy security, with about **80% of its crude oil imports traversing these waters**.
 - The country's growing energy needs make securing **sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean critical**.
 - India's strategic oil reserves, with a current capacity of 5.33 million tonnes, provide only a **9.5-day cushion in case of supply disruptions**.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** The Indian Ocean serves as a platform for India to exert its geopolitical influence and counter the growing Chinese presence in the region.
 - To counter growing Chinese influence through the **"String of Pearls" strategy**, India has

increased its naval presence and established partnerships with countries like **Seychelles, Mauritius, and Maldives.**

- **India's "Act East" and "Neighbourhood First" policies** heavily rely on maritime connectivity.
- The **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**, with 23 member states including **India**, plays a crucial role in regional cooperation.
- The expansion of India's military logistics agreements, now covering 10 countries in the region, further enhances its strategic reach.
- **Environmental and Disaster Management:** The Indian Ocean is vital for India's climate stability and disaster management efforts.
 - India's **7,516 km coastline** is vulnerable to rising sea levels and extreme weather events.
 - The **Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS)** plays a crucial role in ocean monitoring and early warning systems.
 - India's leadership in initiatives like the **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)**, showcases its commitment to regional disaster resilience.
 - The country's rapid response to natural disasters, as seen in its **aid to Mozambique after Cyclone Idai in 2019**, enhances its soft power in the region.
- **Scientific Research and Exploration:** The Indian Ocean offers vast opportunities for scientific research and resource exploration, crucial for India's technological advancement.
 - **India's Deep Ocean Mission**, aims to explore and harness deep-sea resources. The **testing of India's Matsya 6000 (scheduled in late October 2024)**, a manned submersible capable of reaching 6,000 metres depth, marks a significant milestone in deep-sea exploration capabilities.
 - India's ongoing **polymetallic nodule exploration in the Central Indian Ocean Basin**, covering an area of **75,000 square kilometres**, positions it as a pioneer in deep-sea mining.
- **Cultural and Diaspora Connections:** The Indian Ocean has historically been a conduit for cultural exchange, shaping India's maritime heritage and diaspora connections.
 - India's diaspora in Indian Ocean rim countries, contributes significantly to bilateral relations and remittances.
 - The revival of ancient maritime links through initiatives like the **Mausam Project, launched in 2014**, strengthens India's cultural diplomacy.
 - The recent inauguration of the **BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi in February 2024**, the first traditional Hindu temple in the UAE, symbolises the enduring cultural ties facilitated by **Indian Ocean connections.**

What are the Major Challenges that India Encounter in the Indian Ocean Region?

- **Growing Chinese Influence:** China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean poses a significant challenge to India's regional influence.
 - The **"String of Pearls" strategy**, involving Chinese investments in ports like **Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar)**, potentially encircles India.
 - China's first overseas military base in **Djibouti, operational since 2017**, and its increasing naval activities in the region further complicate the strategic landscape.
- **Maritime Security Threats:** India faces persistent maritime security challenges, including piracy, terrorism, and illegal fishing in the Indian Ocean.
 - **Piracy and armed robbery in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** witnessed a **20% jump in 2023**, also emerging threats like cyber-attacks on maritime infrastructure are on the rise.
 - The attack on the **MV Chem Pluto off India's west coast in December 2023**, underscores the evolving nature of maritime terrorism.
 - India's efforts to enhance maritime domain awareness, such as the **Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)**, face challenges in integrating diverse data sources and ensuring real-time information sharing among partner nations.
- **Geopolitical Tensions with Neighbors:** Strained relations with some Indian Ocean neighbors pose challenges to India's regional leadership aspirations.

- The **recent diplomatic row with the Maldives**, following derogatory comments about the Indian Prime Minister in January 2024, led to calls for boycotting Maldivian tourism.
- This incident, coupled with the **Maldives' decision to not renew the hydrographic survey agreement with India and [India-Out Campaign](#)**, reflects the fragility of regional relationships.
 - While **India and the Maldives** are working to revive their relations following the **recent visit of the Maldivian President to India**, there is still a long way to go, with several concerns that need to be addressed.
- Similarly, the **ongoing fishermen issue with Sri Lanka, with over 200 Indian fishermen arrested in 2023 alone**, continues to be a point of contention.
- These tensions complicate India's efforts to maintain a stable and cooperative Indian Ocean neighborhood.
- **Competition for Resources:** The Indian Ocean's vast resources are increasingly becoming a source of competition and potential conflict.
 - India's Deep Ocean Mission faces competition from countries like **China, which has already secured exploration rights in the Southwest Indian Ocean Ridge**.
 - India's efforts to balance economic interests with environmental sustainability, as seen in its commitment to the **Blue Economy framework**, face implementation challenges.
- **Climate Change and Environmental Degradation:** The Indian Ocean region is highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, posing significant challenges to India's coastal security and economy.
 - In the Indian ocean half of sea level rise is due to the volume of water expanding since the ocean is warming up rapidly.
 - The increasing frequency and intensity of cyclones (like **Cyclone Remal in May 2024**) strain India's disaster management capabilities.
 - Marine pollution, including plastic waste (the **Indian Ocean has the second-largest volume of plastic according to the WEF 2016 report**), threatens biodiversity and fisheries. India's efforts, such as the National Coastal Mission launched in 2019, face challenges in coordinating multi-agency responses and securing adequate funding for large-scale interventions.
- **Maritime Infrastructure and Connectivity Gaps:** Despite significant investments, India still faces challenges in developing adequate maritime infrastructure to fully leverage its Indian Ocean position.
 - The **Sagarmala programme** has seen slow progress with only about **25% of the total projects** being completed as of 2023.
 - Connectivity issues, particularly with island territories like **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, limit India's ability to project power and respond quickly to regional crises.
 - The recent announcement of a transshipment hub in **Great Nicobar Island**, while promising, faces environmental concerns and funding challenges.
- **Non-traditional Security Threats:** Emerging non-traditional security threats in the Indian Ocean pose complex challenges for India.
 - These include cybersecurity risks to maritime infrastructure, as evidenced by the **ransomware attack on the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust in 2017**.
 - The increase in drug trafficking through Indian Ocean routes, with around **2,500 kg of high-purity methamphetamine**, worth about Rs. 15,000 crore, was seized in Indian waters, strains law enforcement capabilities.
 - Also, the ongoing challenge of **illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing**, requires enhanced monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.
- **Balancing Multiple Strategic Partnerships:** India's challenge lies in balancing its strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean region without alienating key allies or compromising its autonomy.
 - The **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, Japan, and Australia, while strengthening India's position in the Indo-Pacific**, raises concerns about potential containment strategies against China.
 - Simultaneously, India's participation in groupings like **BRICS and SCO**, which include China and Russia, requires careful diplomatic navigation.
 - With **Egypt, Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia joining the BRICS** adds another layer of complexity to India's strategic calculus in the Indian Ocean region.
 - The recent agreement between Mauritius and the UK regarding the Chagos Archipelago,

which includes **Diego Garcia**, presents significant geopolitical challenges for India.

- While the transfer of sovereignty to Mauritius could potentially open new avenues for Indian influence, the **guaranteed operation of the US-UK military base for 99 years ensures continued Western presence.**

What Steps can India take to Strengthen its Presence in the Indian Ocean Region?

- **Enhance Maritime Infrastructure Development:** India should accelerate its Sagarmala programme, focusing on key projects that boost connectivity and economic activity.
 - In April 2024, India gained access to the **Sittwe Port in Myanmar**, a crucial component of the **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project**.
 - India should prioritize similar projects. Additionally, fast-tracking the development of the **Great Nicobar transshipment hub**, with a planned investment of INR 72,000 crore, would substantially enhance India's maritime capabilities in the **strategic Malacca Strait**.
- **Enhance Naval Capabilities:** India should accelerate its naval modernization program, focusing on **both blue-water and littoral capabilities**.
 - This includes fast-tracking the production of **more indigenous aircraft carriers like INS Vikrant and expanding the submarine fleet**, particularly nuclear-powered submarines.
 - Investing in unmanned systems, such as **autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs) and maritime patrol drones**, can significantly boost surveillance capabilities.
 - **The recent approval (December 2023) for procurement of 97 Tejas Light Combat Aircraft** demonstrates India's commitment to enhancing its air power, which is crucial for maritime domain awareness and power projection in the Indian Ocean.
- **Expand Strategic Partnerships:** India should continue to forge and strengthen strategic partnerships with key Indian Ocean nations and extra-regional powers.
 - The **India-France-UAE trilateral initiative**, announced in February 2023, is a prime example of such partnerships.
 - India should work on similar arrangements with other nations, focusing on **joint naval exercises**, intelligence sharing, and capacity building.
 - The recent agreement with **Sri Lanka to jointly develop the Trincomalee oil tank farm**, demonstrates how strategic partnerships can yield tangible economic benefits.
 - Similarly, the recent India-Maldives discussions in **October 2024**, resulted in key agreements, including a **currency swap deal worth INR 30 billion and USD 400 million**, **Free Trade Agreement (FTA) discussions**, and law enforcement cooperation, and infrastructure projects such as the **repair of a Maldivian Coast Guard vessel**, the launch of the **Rupay card**, and the inauguration of **700 housing units and a new runway at Hanimaadhoo Airport**.
 - These developments underscore the importance of sustained engagement in the region.
- **Strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness:** India should further develop its maritime domain awareness capabilities by expanding the network of coastal radar stations and integrating advanced satellite and AI-based monitoring systems.
 - The **Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** should be upgraded with real-time data processing capabilities and expanded partnerships with more Indian Ocean littoral states.
 - Implementing projects like the **National Maritime Domain Awareness (NMDA) grid**, which aims to interlink naval and coast guard stations, can significantly enhance India's situational awareness.
 - The **recent launch of ISRO's Oceansat-3 satellite**, dedicated to oceanic observations, is a step in this direction and should be followed by more specialized maritime surveillance satellites.
- **Develop Strategic Island Territories:** India should accelerate the development of its strategic island territories, particularly the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep**.
 - This includes enhancing military infrastructure, improving connectivity, and promoting sustainable economic development.

- Strategic Initiatives should be undertaken in other islands, including the development of **dual-use airstrips and naval facilities**. Implementing the **Integrated Island Management Plans** for these territories, with a focus on balancing strategic interests with environmental conservation, should be prioritized.
- **Expand Maritime Partnerships:** India should strengthen its maritime partnerships through increased naval exercises, joint patrols, and capacity-building initiatives with Indian Ocean littoral states and major powers.
 - The **expansion of the [Malabar Exercise](#) to include Australia** as a permanent member from 2020 is a positive step.
 - Initiatives like the **[SAGAR \(Security and Growth for All in the Region\)](#) doctrine** should be backed by concrete actions, such as providing patrol vessels, training, and technical assistance to small island nations to build their maritime capabilities.
- **Invest in Blue Economy Initiatives:** India should aggressively pursue its Blue Economy agenda, focusing on sustainable exploitation of marine resources, development of coastal and marine tourism, and promotion of marine biotechnology.
 - Encouraging **private sector participation in areas like deep-sea mining, marine aquaculture, and offshore renewable energy** can drive innovation and economic growth.
- **Enhance Disaster Response Capabilities:** Given the Indian Ocean's vulnerability to natural disasters, India should further develop its regional disaster response capabilities.
 - This includes **expanding the capacity of the [National Disaster Response Force \(NDRF\)](#)** for maritime disasters and establishing forward operating bases in strategic locations.
 - **INS Jalashwa's arrival at Port Ehoala, Madagascar**, on March 22, 2021, to deliver humanitarian aid as part of the SAGAR initiative marked a positive step in strengthening India's regional outreach.

Conclusion:

India's strategic engagement in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** is crucial for enhancing its maritime security, economic interests, and geopolitical influence. To navigate this complex landscape, India must focus on strengthening its naval capabilities, expanding strategic partnerships, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and actively pursuing its Blue Economy agenda. By adopting a multifaceted approach, **India can effectively assert its role as a key player in ensuring regional stability and security in the IOR.**

Drishti Mains Question:

The Indian Ocean holds immense strategic significance for India's security, trade, and regional influence. Analyze the key challenges and opportunities for India in the Indian Ocean region.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. India is a member of which among the following? (2015)

1. Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
2. Association of South-East Asian Nations
3. East Asia Summit

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 3 only

(c) 1, 2 and 3

(d) India is a member of none of them

Ans: (b)

Mains

Q.1 What is the significance of Indo-US defense deals over Indo-Russian defense deals? Discuss with reference to stability in the Indo-Pacific region. **(2020)**

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