



Building a Secure and Prosperous Indian Ocean Region

*This editorial is based on “[What India needs to do in the Indian Ocean](#)” which was published in *The Indian Express* on 15/02/2025. The article brings into focus the Indian Ocean's strategic importance, once dominated by India but now contested by global powers. The Eighth Indian Ocean Conference highlights its growing geopolitical significance and India's renewed maritime aspirations.*

For Prelims: [Indian Ocean](#), [Sagarmala Project](#), [SAGAR \(Security and Growth for All in the Region\)](#), [Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative](#), [Quad](#), [BIMSTEC](#), [ASEAN Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region](#), [Djibouti Code of Conduct \(DCoC\) & Jeddah Amendment](#), [Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka](#).

For Mains: Key Stakes of India in the Indian Ocean Region, Key Strategic Concerns for India in the Indian Ocean Region.

The [Indian Ocean](#), deriving its name from **India's millennia-old civilizational influence**, stands as a critical maritime artery handling **70% of global container traffic**. While India once dominated these waters in the first millennium, **leading to its economic supremacy**. But today, as global power shifts to the Indian Ocean Region, this body of water has become increasingly **contested**, with major powers including the **US, UK, France, and China vying for influence**. The ongoing **Eighth Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat**, bringing together foreign ministers from 30 countries, underscores the region's growing **significance in global geopolitics and India's renewed maritime aspirations**.

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What are the Key Stakes of India in the Indian Ocean Region?

- **Economic Lifeline and Trade Dominance:** The Indian Ocean is India's primary trade artery, carrying nearly **80% of its external trade and 90% of energy imports**.
 - In FY22, all key ports in India handled **720.29 million tonnes (MT) of cargo traffic**. India's merchandise exports in FY23 were at **US\$ 451 billion**.
 - Ensuring free and secure sea lanes is vital for sustaining economic growth and energy security.
 - The government's **Sagarmala Project** focuses on port-led development to boost exports and reduce logistics costs.
- **Geopolitical and Strategic Influence:** India seeks to counterbalance China's increasing naval presence and infrastructure projects in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, which threaten regional stability.
 - Through **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)** and the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative**, India is reinforcing its regional leadership.
 - Bilateral and multilateral partnerships, including **Quad, IORA, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN**, are central to maintaining influence.
 - Strengthening ties with key partners like Oman, Maldives, and Seychelles enhances India's strategic depth.
- **Maritime Security and Counterterrorism:** The Indian Ocean is a **hotspot for piracy, smuggling, and sea-based terrorism**, making maritime security a key priority.
 - India has strengthened naval capabilities through fleet modernization, increased patrols, and intelligence-sharing agreements.
 - The **Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** in Gurugram tracks maritime threats, enhancing regional security cooperation.
 - Indian Navy has deployed **Mission-Based Deployments (MBDs)** across **key choke points**, including the **Strait of Malacca**.

Figure 5. Choke Points in the Indian Ocean



- **Energy Security and Blue Economy Expansion:** The Indian Ocean is critical for securing energy imports from the **Middle East** and expanding **India's blue economy potential**.
 - **Offshore energy exploration**, deep-sea mining, and marine biotechnology offer new growth opportunities.
 - India is investing in **offshore wind farms and hydrogen fuel production** to transition towards clean energy.
 - India's blue economy contributes **4% to GDP**. The **Deep Ocean Mission (MATYSA 6000)** aims to explore **polymetallic nodules** in the Central Indian Ocean Basin.
- **Infrastructure Development and Connectivity:** To strengthen its economic and strategic footprint, India is developing **critical infrastructure in the IOR**.
 - Projects like **Chabahar Port in Iran** and **Sittwe Port in Myanmar** enhance regional trade and connectivity.
 - Collaboration with **Japan and ASEAN** for **island development and smart ports** bolsters India's maritime logistics.
 - India is charting a course towards robust infrastructure development with a planned **USD 82 billion investment in port projects by 2035**.
- **Climate Change and Environmental Leadership:** As rising sea levels threaten coastal cities and island nations, **India is leading climate resilience efforts in the IOR**.
 - Initiatives like **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)** and **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** promote sustainable development.
 - In June 2024, CDRI committed **\$8 million through its IRIS Programme** to strengthen disaster-resilient infrastructure in **Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**.
 - Strengthening climate diplomacy enhances India's credibility as a responsible ocean state.
 - The **Blue Flag certification** has been awarded to **12 Indian beaches**, promoting

eco-friendly coastal tourism.

- **Cultural and Historical Ties Strengthening Soft Power:** India's historical maritime ties with **Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa** position it as a natural leader in the IOR.
 - Shared civilizational links, including the **spread of Buddhism and ancient trade networks**, enhance India's soft power.
 - Cultural diplomacy through [Project Mausam](#) and naval goodwill missions fosters deeper regional engagement.
 - For instance, The [India-Africa Forum Summit \(IAFS\)](#) deepens cooperation with African nations, focusing on capacity building.
 - Also, India has emerged as a **leading advocate for the [Global South](#)**, representing the interests of numerous Indian Ocean nations.

What are the Key Strategic Concerns for India in the Indian Ocean Region?

- **China's Expanding Naval Presence and Encirclement Strategy:** China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean through the **String of Pearls** strategy threatens India's maritime security and regional dominance.
 - **Chinese military bases, dual-use ports, and frequent naval patrols** in IOR challenge India's strategic autonomy.
 - The leasing of [Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka](#) and [Gwadar in Pakistan](#) provides Beijing a foothold near India's critical sea lanes.
 - China has **17 strategic port investments** in IOR, including **Djibouti's naval base** and **Ream Naval Base in Cambodia**.
 - In **2023**, Chinese research cum spy vessel **Shi Yan 6** docked in the Maldives, raising security concerns.
- **Maritime Security Threats: Piracy, Terrorism, and Illegal Activities:** The rise in **piracy, arms trafficking, and terrorism in the Indian Ocean** disrupts trade routes and threatens national security.
 - The **resurgence of Somali piracy** and Pakistan-based terror networks pose continuous risks.
 - Drug and human trafficking networks in the Arabian Sea undermine regional **stability and law enforcement capabilities**.
 - The **Indian Navy** carried out **18 rescue operations in the Arabian Sea** from mid-December 2023 to March 2024 under its [Operation Sankalp](#).
 - Also, **unregulated fishing by foreign vessels**, including **Chinese deep-sea trawlers**, depletes India's marine resources.
- **Geopolitical Competition and Growing Foreign Military Presence:** The Indian Ocean is witnessing intense geopolitical competition, with the **US, China, UK, France, and Russia** increasing their naval deployments.
 - The growing presence of extra-regional powers, **US's Diego Garcia base** whereas Russia is **securing its first African naval base in Sudan**, gaining a crucial foothold in the Red Sea—**one of the world's busiest trade routes**.
 - The leasing of critical ports and infrastructure by foreign powers limits India's ability to shape regional security.
 - The [AUKUS Pact \(2021\)](#) is further strengthening Western presence in the Indo-Pacific, altering power dynamics in IOR.
- **Climate Change and Environmental Risks in the Indian Ocean: Rising sea levels, frequent cyclones, and coral reef degradation** threaten India's coastal security and marine economy.
 - Climate-induced displacement of populations from island nations like **Maldives and Seychelles** can lead to geopolitical instability.
 - The **Indian Ocean is among the fastest warming oceans**, with dire consequences for heat waves and extreme rain over the Indian subcontinent.
 - **Marine heat waves** are also a major concern now for corals and fisheries.
 - Also, the **2024 coral bleaching season in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO)** was severe due to [El Niño](#), **positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) phases**.
- **Weak Naval Infrastructure and Lagging Shipbuilding Capabilities:** India's naval

modernization and **domestic shipbuilding industry lag behind global standards**, limiting its ability to project power in IOR.

- The **reliance on foreign imports for advanced naval equipment**, including submarines and aircraft carriers, hampers operational readiness.
- Infrastructure bottlenecks at major Indian ports reduce efficiency in logistics and maritime trade.
- India ranks **20th in global shipbuilding with only a 0.06% share**, while China alone holds over 50%.
 - The annual shipbuilding output of Indian shipyards is only 0.072 million GT.

▪ **Cybersecurity Threats and Undersea Cable Vulnerability: Subsea cables currently transmit more than 99% of the world's internet traffic.**

- The deployment of the **India Asia Xpress (IAX)** and **India Europe Xpress (IEX)** undersea cables marks a major advancement in India's connectivity with Asia and Europe.
 - It leaves highly vulnerable to **cyber threats**.
- Increasing cyberattacks on India's maritime infrastructure, including ports and naval networks, highlight the need for stronger cybersecurity measures.
- In 2021, **Recorded Future (Cybersecurity company)** observed an active '**handshake**' **between a China-linked group and an Indian maritime port**, with some connections still operational.

What are the Key Multilateral Groupings in the Indian Ocean that India is a part of?

- **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA):** Promotes regional cooperation in **maritime security, trade, blue economy, and disaster resilience**.
 - **India's Role:** Founding member, actively pushing initiatives in security, trade, and climate action.
- **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)**
 - **Objective:** Strengthen maritime cooperation among navies of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
 - **India's Role:** Initiated by the **Indian Navy (2008)**; key player in joint exercises and information-sharing.
- **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)**
 - **Objective:** Regional cooperation among Bay of Bengal littorals in security, trade, connectivity, and disaster management.
 - **India's Role:** Lead country in **security, transport connectivity, and energy cooperation**.
- **Colombo Security Conclave (CSC)**
 - **Objective:** Strengthen regional security cooperation in the Indian Ocean, focusing on counterterrorism, cyber threats, and HADR.
 - **India's Role:** Founding member along with Sri Lanka and Maldives;
- **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**
 - **Objective:** Promote a **free, open, and rules-based maritime order** in the Indo-Pacific.
 - **India's Role:** Launched by India (2019); leads efforts in maritime security and connectivity.
- **Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) & Jeddah Amendment**
 - **Objective:** Counter piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime crimes in the western Indian Ocean.
 - **India's Role:** **Observer state**, supporting regional maritime security initiatives.
- **QUAD (India-US-Japan-Australia)**
 - **Objective:** Ensure maritime security, freedom of navigation, and counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.
 - **India's Role:** Active in joint **naval exercises (Malabar)** and infrastructure projects in IOR.
- **ASEAN-India Maritime Cooperation**
 - It promote maritime transport cooperation between ASEAN and India, and encourage

What Measures can India Adopt to Strengthen its Influence in the Indian Ocean?

- **Expanding Naval and Maritime Capabilities:** India must accelerate its **blue-water navy expansion** by commissioning more aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and multi-role warships to project power effectively.
 - Strengthening **Mission-Based Deployments (MBDs)** in key chokepoints will enhance maritime domain awareness.
 - Developing **anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities** and undersea surveillance networks will counter external military threats.
 - Investing in **AI-driven maritime intelligence** and cyber-resilient naval systems will ensure technological superiority.
 - Strengthening **logistics agreements with regional partners** will allow sustained naval operations across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Enhancing Indian-led Infrastructure Development:** India must lead the development of **strategic port infrastructure** under a co-development model to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through **Diamond of Necklace Strategy**.
 - Strengthening projects like **Chabahar Port (Iran), Sabang Port (Indonesia), and Sittwe Port (Myanmar)** will enhance trade and connectivity.
 - Upgrading **Indian ports like Kandla, Kochi, and Visakhapatnam** into transshipment hubs will boost India's maritime economy.
 - Establishing **India-led special economic zones (SEZs) in island nations** will promote sustainable regional growth.
- **Deepening Regional Security Partnerships:** India must institutionalize **defense cooperation frameworks** like **India, France and UAE Maritime Partnership Exercise and Indo-Pacific QUAD (India, US, Japan, Australia)**.
 - Expanding **defense exports of naval equipment and indigenous shipbuilding projects** will bolster regional self-reliance.
 - Establishing **coastal radar networks** in partner nations will improve shared maritime domain awareness.
 - Enhancing **humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities** will position India as a first responder in regional crises.
- **Strengthening Economic and Trade Diplomacy:** India must accelerate the development of **new trade corridors** in the Indian Ocean, such as the **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)**.
 - Developing **currency swap agreements and regional payment mechanisms** will reduce trade dependence on external currencies.
 - Enhancing **blue economy cooperation** through joint ventures in **fisheries, ocean mining, offshore wind energy, and marine biotechnology** will create mutual economic benefits.
 - Promoting **"Make in India" naval shipbuilding collaborations** will support regional maritime industry growth.
 - Leveraging **BIMSTEC and IORA** for regional economic integration will strengthen India's economic leadership.
- **Establishing a Strong Cyber and Digital Strategy:** India must invest in **secure undersea data cables, 5G expansion, and indigenous satellite-based navigation (NavIC)** to reduce dependence on foreign networks.
 - Expanding **digital public infrastructure (DPI) projects** like **Aadhaar, UPI (like in UAE), and CoWIN** in IOR nations will increase India's technological influence.
 - Strengthening **cybersecurity frameworks for Indian ports, naval networks, and oil infrastructure** will protect against digital threats.
 - Collaborating with **ASEAN and Africa on data governance and AI cooperation** will create a regional digital ecosystem.

- **Strengthening Climate and Sustainable Development Leadership:** India must lead **green shipping corridors** and promote **decarbonization in maritime trade** to position itself as a sustainability leader.
 - Expanding **solar and wind energy projects** under the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** will enhance regional energy security.
 - Developing **blue carbon initiatives like mangrove restoration and ocean conservation programs** will strengthen India's ecological diplomacy.
 - Encouraging **marine-based ecotourism and sustainable fisheries management** will generate economic growth while preserving marine biodiversity.
- **Enhancing Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy:** India must deepen **historical and civilizational ties** through **Project Mausam, Buddhist circuit diplomacy, and education scholarships** for IOR nations.
 - Strengthening **people-to-people ties through tourism, medical diplomacy, and student exchange programs** will enhance India's regional goodwill.
 - Promoting **regional language broadcasting and digital outreach** via DD India and Indian news agencies will counter external narratives.
 - Expanding **cooperation in Ayurveda, yoga, and traditional medicine sectors** will strengthen India's cultural influence.

Conclusion:

India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are shaped by its historical maritime significance and its contemporary focus on security, trade, and regional cooperation. As the Indian Prime Minister emphasized on the 5-S framework—**Samman, Samvad, Sahyog, Samridhi, and Shanti**—as pillars of Indian diplomacy and through initiatives like **SAGAR and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative**, India is poised to lead the region towards **greater stability, sustainability, and shared growth**, ensuring a balanced global order in the Indian Ocean.

Drishti Mains Question:

Assess the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in the context of India's foreign policy. How can India enhance its influence in the region amidst growing geopolitical competition?

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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