

EIGHTH INDIAN OCEAN CONFERENCE – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NEWS: *India, in partnership with its Indian Ocean neighbors like Singapore and Oman, is hosting the **Eighth Indian Ocean Conference (IOC)** in Muscat, Oman. This conference is a significant event to discuss the future and strategic importance of the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.*

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Strategic and Historical Significance of the Indian Ocean

Historical Importance of the Indian Ocean

1. The **Indian Ocean has been a vital maritime hub** for global trade, commerce, and cultural exchanges for centuries.
2. It is named the **Indian Ocean** or "**Hind Mahasagar**", reflecting **India's historical influence in the region** and its central role in shaping trade networks, cultural exchanges, and political interactions.
3. Unlike the **Atlantic and Arctic Oceans**, the Indian Ocean is not just a **body of water** but also a **historical and cultural region**, where civilizations have interacted and flourished for millennia.

Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean

1. The Indian Ocean is home to **26 coastal countries**, along with several **landlocked nations such as Nepal and Bhutan**, which depend on Indian Ocean trade routes for commerce.
2. The **Indian Ocean's economic and military significance** has been recognized throughout history, as it served as a crucial conduit for **trade, naval expeditions, and cultural exchanges**.
3. Historically, **India's maritime trade connected the East and the West**, forming a part of the **Maritime Silk Route**, which facilitated the exchange of **goods, ideas, and religious influences** across Asia, Africa, and Europe.
4. In modern times, the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has increased due to **geopolitical competition**, as global superpowers seek to **control vital sea lanes, maritime trade routes, and natural resources**.
5. The Indian Ocean is now being actively viewed as a **potential region for peace, cooperation, and economic development**, amid increasing **geopolitical tensions between major world powers** such as the United States, China, and India.



India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

1. India's Maritime Influence in Ancient and Medieval Times

- As early as the **first millennium**, India played a **crucial role in maritime trade and commerce**, with its merchant guilds, including **Manigramam and Chettis**, actively participating in trade networks spanning the **Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa**.
- The **Chola and Pallava dynasties** were known for their **naval dominance**, conducting **successful maritime expeditions** to Southeast Asia, including present-day **Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia**.
- These Indian merchants and rulers facilitated the **spread of Indian culture, languages, and religious ideas (Hinduism and Buddhism)** across the Indian Ocean region.

2. Decline of India's Maritime Power During Colonial Rule

- Despite its long maritime history, India's **economic and naval influence in the Indian Ocean declined** with the arrival of **European colonial powers** such as the **Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British**.
- European powers dominated the **Indian Ocean trade routes**, while India gradually lost its strategic maritime influence.
- The **British Empire**, despite being a major seafaring power, **never developed a strong naval or shipbuilding infrastructure in India**, which led to a **long-term neglect of maritime capabilities** in the region.

3. Post-Independence Maritime Weakness

- After gaining independence in **1947**, India **prioritized land-based military strategies**, focusing primarily on **border security and territorial defense** rather than maritime strength.
- This lack of maritime focus led to India **falling behind in naval development, shipbuilding, and ocean-based strategic planning**.
- Even today, India **ranks 20th in global shipbuilding**, holding only **0.6% of the global market share**, highlighting the **need for increased investment in maritime industries**.

India's Realization and Strategic Focus on the Indian Ocean

1. India's Growing Maritime Awareness

- India's **peninsular geography**, with over **7,500 km of coastline**, makes the Indian Ocean **crucial for its economic and national security interests**.
- For decades, India **underestimated the strategic potential of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, but over time, policymakers realized its **growing significance in global trade and defense strategy**.
- The Indian Ocean is now **central to India's foreign policy**, as it is a key conduit for:
 - **80% of India's external trade**.
 - **90% of its energy imports**, including crude oil and liquefied natural gas.

2. India's Strategic and Defense Initiatives in the Indian Ocean

- Recognizing the **security risks in the Indian Ocean**, India has **strengthened its naval presence and defense partnerships** with regional allies such as **Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles**.
- India has launched several **strategic maritime initiatives**, including:
 - **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)**: A policy framework aimed at ensuring **regional security and cooperation** among Indian Ocean nations.
 - **Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployments**: India has positioned naval warships and surveillance assets across the Indian Ocean to monitor **maritime security threats**.
 - **Quad Partnership**: India collaborates with **the US, Japan, and Australia** to maintain **stability and free navigation in the Indo-Pacific region**.

India's Policy Shift in the Indian Ocean

Strengthening Regional Ties:

- India is **actively engaging with IOR nations** through:
 - **Indian Ocean Conference (IOC)** – A key diplomatic platform initiated by India.
 - **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)** – Multilateral cooperation on **economic and maritime security**.
 - **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)** – Enhancing **naval interoperability and intelligence sharing**.

- **Colombo Security Conclave** – Focuses on **maritime security & counterterrorism** with Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius.

SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region):

- **Launched in 2015** under PM Modi, this initiative aims to:
 - **Strengthen India's leadership in IOR.**
 - **Ensure free and open sea lanes** for secure global trade.
 - **Promote sustainable maritime development.**

Enhancing Blue-Water Capabilities:

- **Naval Expansion:** India is **modernizing its navy** by inducting **indigenous aircraft carriers** and advanced submarines.
- **Maritime Surveillance:** Deployment of **P-8I Poseidon aircraft**, and **satellite-based tracking systems**.
- **Quad Cooperation:** **India, U.S., Japan, and Australia** collaborate on **maritime security, anti-submarine warfare, and intelligence sharing**.

Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

1. Maritime Security Threats

- The Indian Ocean region faces increasing threats from:
 - **Piracy and maritime terrorism**, especially along the coasts of **Somalia and the Arabian Sea**.
 - **Illegal fishing and poaching**, which threaten **marine biodiversity and regional economies**.
 - **Human trafficking and arms smuggling**, particularly in conflict-prone areas such as the **Horn of Africa and the Andaman Sea**.

2. Environmental Challenges

- **Rising sea levels due to climate change** pose a major threat to low-lying **island nations** in the Indian Ocean, such as **Maldives and Seychelles**.
- **Marine pollution** from shipping, oil spills, and plastic waste is causing severe environmental damage in the region.
- **Overfishing and coral reef degradation** are leading to **biodiversity loss**, impacting the livelihoods of millions of people dependent on fishing industries.

3. Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Challenges

- The Indian Ocean region is prone to **natural disasters**, including:
 - **Cyclones, tsunamis, and earthquakes**, which frequently impact coastal communities.
 - India has **played a key role** in providing humanitarian assistance, especially during crises such as the **2004 Indian Ocean tsunami** and the **Cyclone Idai disaster in Africa (2019)**.

4. Geopolitical Rivalries and High-Tech Warfare

- The Indian Ocean has become a **geopolitical battleground**, with major powers **competing for strategic dominance**.

- **China's growing naval presence** and the development of **military bases in the Indian Ocean (e.g., Djibouti)** have raised security concerns.
- **Undersea communication cables** managed by **Chinese companies like Huawei and European firms** have become a new area of **technological competition and intelligence gathering**.

Conclusion: The Future of the Indian Ocean and India's Role

- The Indian Ocean has been a **historically significant trade route** and **cultural bridge** connecting civilizations across Asia, Africa, and Europe.
- In modern times, it has **emerged as a crucial geopolitical region**, influencing **global trade, security, and international diplomacy**.
- **India's maritime strategy has evolved significantly**, with increasing investments in **naval power, infrastructure development, and diplomatic partnerships**.
- As **geopolitical tensions rise**, India's role in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** will be **critical** in ensuring **regional stability, free trade, and collective security**.
- The challenges in the region—including **maritime security threats, climate change, and geopolitical rivalries**—require India to **strengthen its leadership role** and work towards a **collaborative and sustainable Indian Ocean strategy**.

Indian Ocean

- The Indian Ocean is the **third largest ocean** in the world, after the **Pacific and Atlantic Oceans**.
- It spans 9,600 km from the **Bay of Bengal** to the Antarctic and 7,800 km from South Africa to Western Australia.
 - **Eastern Boundary:** It stretches to the **Strait of Malacca** and the western coast of **Australia**, marking its eastern limit.
 - **Western Boundary:** The Indian Ocean reaches the **Mozambique Channel** in the west, which lies between the African continent and the island of Madagascar.
 - **Northern Boundary:** The northern part of the ocean includes the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.
 - **Southern Boundary:** It extends down into the southern Indian Ocean, beyond the southern tip of Africa, and approaching the Antarctic region.
- The ocean covers a total area of 21.45 million square nautical miles, which accounts for 20% of the world's water surface.
- The Indian Ocean's total coastline stretches across 70,000 km.
- The Indian Ocean is home to about 36 countries, with around 35% of the world's population living in the region. It also contains about 40% of the world's coastline.
- **Global Trade and Commerce:** The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a key hub for global commerce:
 - Nearly 100,000 ships transit the ocean annually.
 - The region handles 30% of global containerized cargo.

- 42% of global crude oil and its products are transported through the Indian Ocean, making it crucial for global energy markets.
- **Key choke points:** Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandeb
- **Energy Reserves and Refining:** The region is rich in energy resources, holding:
 - Over 50% of the world's oil reserves.
 - Over 50% of the world's proven natural gas reserves.
- The Indian Ocean houses around 20% of the world's refining facilities, located mainly in: Jubail (Saudi Arabia), Jamnagar (Gujarat, India) and Singapore

Source: https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/39076/Keynote_Address_by_EAM_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_Indian_Ocean_Conference_2025_Voyage_to_New_Horizons_of_Maritime_Partnership_February_16_2025