



## Securing the Indian Ocean Region

**For Prelims:** [Parliamentary Standing Committee](#), [Indian Ocean Region \(IOR\)](#), [String of Pearls](#), [Horn of Africa](#), [SAARC](#), [BIMSTEC](#), [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#), [Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services \(INCOIS\)](#), [Deep Ocean Mission](#), [MAHASAGAR \(Maritime Heads for Active Security And Growth for All in the Region\)](#), [Colombo Security Conclave](#), [NAVIC](#).

**For Mains:** Significance of the Indian Ocean Region for India, Challenges that India Encounter in the Indian Ocean due to Chinese presence in IOR, Steps needed by India to counter Chinese presence in IOR.

[Source: TH](#)

### Why in News?

The **report of the [Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs](#)** highlights that the **growing presence of extra-regional players** in the [Indian Ocean Region \(IOR\)](#), particularly **China's increasing foothold**, poses a significant **strategic challenge for India**.



## How is China Expanding Strategic Presence in the Indian Ocean Region?

- **Dual-Use Infrastructure:** China is investing in **dual-use (civilian and military)** infrastructure like **ports, airports, and logistics hubs** across **IOR littoral states**, forming a **naval support network**—examples include [Hambantota](#) (Sri Lanka, leased for 99 years), **Gwadar** (Pakistan, part of CPEC), and **Chittagong** (Bangladesh) & **Kyaukpyu** (Myanmar), near **India's maritime boundaries**.
  - China's [String of Pearls](#) strategy envisions a **naval logistics network** that facilitates **swift troop deployment** in times of conflict.
- **Military Expansion & Naval Deployment:** China has significantly increased its **naval presence in the IOR** through the **Djibouti Military Base (2017)** enabling **sustained naval operations** along with **increased warship deployments** including **submarines**.
  - It also sends “scientific” research vessels (e.g., **Xiang Yang Hong 3**) for **oceanographic surveys**, aiding **submarine operations** and **maritime domain awareness**.
- **Debt-Trap Diplomacy:** China's [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#) projects often involve **unsustainable loans**, creating **debt traps**—as seen in **Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port crisis** and the **Maldives' infrastructure loans**, increasing dependence on **Beijing**.
  - By leveraging **economic vulnerabilities**, China pressures **IOR nations** to align with its **strategic interests**, often at the cost of **regional stability**.
- **Diplomatic & Security Partnerships:** China conducts **joint naval exercises** with **Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Iran, and Russia**, strengthening its **maritime military ties**. Politically, it backs **pro-China leaders**, such as the **Maldives' President Muizzu**, to expand its **influence in the region**.
  - Additionally, the launch of the “[China-Indian Ocean Region Forum](#)” highlights Beijing's growing **strategic and economic interests** in the region.

### China's “String of Pearls” Strategy

- The **String of Pearls** is a **geopolitical theory** that refers to **China's increasing efforts** to develop and expand its **ports and naval bases** throughout the **Indian Ocean Region**, from the [Strait of Malacca](#) to the [Horn of Africa](#).
- The theory suggests that **China** is seeking to establish a series of **strategic naval bases** and **commercial ports** along key **sea-lanes** in the **Indian Ocean**, to protect its **vital energy imports** and enhance its **maritime influence**.
- These “pearls” include ports such as **Gwadar** in **Pakistan**, **Hambantota** in **Sri Lanka**, and **Djibouti** in **Africa**, which provide **China** with greater **access and influence** in the region.

## How China's Presence in the Indian Ocean Region Threatens India's Interest in Region?

- **Military and Security Threats:** China's strategic ports—**Gwadar, Hambantota, Djibouti, and Coco Islands**—enable the **Chinese Navy** to **deploy warships**, **monitor Indian naval activity**, and potentially **blockade key sea lanes** like the **Malacca Strait** and [Strait of Hormuz](#).
- **Economic and Strategic Threats:** With **80% of India's oil imports** passing through the **IOR**, China could **disrupt trade routes** during conflict, threatening **India's energy security**.
  - Through Chinese [debt-trap diplomacy](#), India risks **losing traditional allies**, **diplomatic leverage** in [SAARC](#) and [BIMSTEC](#), and faces increased **Chinese naval access** near its shores via **client states**.
- **Intelligence & Surveillance Threats:** **Chinese spy ships** like **Xiang Yang Hong 03** and **electronic surveillance bases** in **Gwadar** enhance China's **monitoring of Indian naval activity**, while **suspected undersea sensor networks** aid **submarine detection**.
  - This poses a threat to **India's naval secrecy** and undermines its **nuclear deterrent**,

especially the operations of [Arihant-class SSBNs](#) ("Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear).

- **Diplomatic & Geopolitical Threats:** China's expanding influence in **Nepal, Maldives, and Bangladesh**, combined with **military partnerships** like **China-Pakistan naval drills** and **China-Iran-Russia cooperation**, threatens to **isolate India in its own neighborhood**, weaken its **strategic autonomy**, and heighten **reliance on the US and Quad** for regional balance.
- **Threat to Indo-Pacific Stability:** China's **military expansion in the IOR** is part of a broader strategy to **dominate the Indo-Pacific**.
  - This **upsets the strategic balance** and may provoke **military confrontations** involving **extra-regional players** like the **US, Japan, and Australia**—putting **India in a volatile environment**

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

- **Strategic Maritime Security:** India sees itself as a **net security provider**, reflected in the launch of **INS Vikrant (2022)** and **17 multilateral & 20 bilateral naval exercises** annually.
  - The [Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region \(IFC-IOR, 2018\)](#) enhances **maritime domain awareness** and coordination.
- **Economic Lifeline:** **80% of India's external trade** and **90% of energy trade** pass through the Indian Ocean. These routes handle **70% of global container traffic**.
  - Ports like [Vizhinjam \(Kerala\)](#) aim to boost **transshipment share**. The **Blue Economy** is expected to contribute **4% to GDP**.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** The **ocean** is central to countering China's **"String of Pearls" strategy**, prompting **India** to deepen ties with **Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives**.
  - Through initiatives like **"Act East"**, **"Neighbourhood First"**, and active participation in [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#), India is enhancing **maritime connectivity** and **regional influence**.
- **Environmental and Disaster Management:** India's **11,098 km coastline** faces threats from **sea-level rise** and **extreme weather**, with the [Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services \(INCOIS\)](#) providing vital **monitoring and early warning**.
  - India's leadership in the [Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure \(CDRI\)](#) and **humanitarian aid**, such as to **Mozambique after Cyclone Idai (2019)**, strengthens its **soft power**.
- **Scientific Research and Exploration:** The **Indian Ocean** supports India's **technological advancement** through initiatives like the [Deep Ocean Mission](#), featuring [Matsya 6000](#), a manned submersible for deep-sea exploration.
  - India's [polymetallic nodule](#) exploration in the **Central Indian Ocean Basin (75,000 sq km)** positions it as a **pioneer in deep-sea mining**.

## How India Can Strengthen its Presence in the IOR and Counter China's Expansion?

- **Military & Security Measures:** India should enhance **naval capabilities** by expanding its **submarine fleet**, advancing the **aircraft carrier program (at least 3)**, strengthening **anti-submarine warfare (ASW) systems** and deploying **undersea surveillance networks**.
  - The [Andaman & Nicobar Command \(ANC\)](#) must be upgraded with **naval/air bases, missile systems, electronic warfare assets**, and regular **exercises with QUAD and ASEAN**.
- **Economic & Infrastructure Countermeasures:** India should promote its [MAHASAGAR \(Maritime Heads for Active Security And Growth for All in the Region\)](#) policy by positioning the [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)](#) as a **BRI alternative**, and investing in **regional ports** like **Chabahar (Iran), Sabang (Indonesia), and Duqm (Oman)**.
  - Offering **grants and soft loans**, India can reduce IOR nations' **dependence on China**, while supporting **infrastructure projects** in **Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh**.
- **Diplomatic & Strategic Alliances:** India should **strengthen QUAD** by expanding its **maritime security role** and deepen **defense ties** with **the US, Japan, Australia, and**

**France** for **technology sharing**.

- It must **revitalize regional groupings** like the **IORA** for **collective security** and leverage [Colombo Security Conclave](#) for **counterterrorism** and **maritime cooperation**.

- **Technological Enhancements:** India should expand [NAVIC](#) coverage and deploy additional **reconnaissance satellites** to enhance **maritime domain awareness** and monitor **Chinese naval movements**.
  - It must also develop **AI-driven maritime tracking systems** and strengthen **cybersecurity** to counter **Chinese cyber-espionage** targeting **ports and naval bases**.
- **Soft Power & Cultural Diplomacy:** India should strengthen **historical and cultural ties** in the **IOR** by reviving **ancient maritime routes**, promoting **Buddhism**, expanding **education and skill development**, and lead in [Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief \(HADR\)](#) efforts through **rapid-response naval teams** for **tsunamis, cyclones**, and other disasters to enhance **regional goodwill**.

## Conclusion

China's expanding **IOR presence** threatens India's **security, economy, and regional influence**. To counter this, India must **bolster naval capabilities**, offer **economic alternatives to BRI**, strengthen **alliances like QUAD**, enhance **surveillance**, and leverage **soft power**. A **proactive, multi-dimensional strategy** is essential to safeguard India's **maritime interests** and maintain **regional stability**.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

How does China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) pose a strategic challenge for India? What steps India can take to counter China's growing influence in IOR?

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

### **Prelims**

**Q. With reference to 'Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC)', consider the following statements: (2015)**

1. It was established very recently in response to incidents of piracy and accidents of oil spills.
2. It is an alliance meant for maritime security only.

**Which of the statements given above is/ are correct?**

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

**Ans: (d)**

### **Mains**



**Q.** Discuss the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Maldives for India with a focus on global trade and energy flows. Further also discuss how this relationship affects India's maritime security and regional stability amidst international competition? (2024)

**Q.** 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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