



Strengthening India's Indo-Pacific Strategy

This editorial is based on “[Charting a route for IORA under India's chairship](#)” which was published in The Hindu on 22/03/2025. The article brings into picture the funding and governance challenges of IORA. As India prepares to chair in 2025, it has a crucial opportunity to enhance regional cooperation and its Indo-Pacific influence.

For Prelims: [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#), [Indo-Pacific framework](#), [India's SAGAR doctrine](#), [Strait of Hormuz](#), [China+1 strategies](#), [Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository](#), [Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure](#), [Voice of Global South Summit](#), [AUKUS](#), [RCEP](#).

For Mains: Significance of the Indo-Pacific Region for India, Key Issues Hindering India's Active Engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

The [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#), a crucial regional body connecting **Asia, Africa, and Australia**, faces funding constraints and governance challenges despite its strategic importance. The Indian Ocean Region holds immense geostrategic value—facilitating 75% of global trade and housing two-thirds of humanity. As India prepares to **chair IORA from November 2025**, it represents a critical moment for India to strengthen **regional cooperation and advance its strategic interests within the broader [Indo-Pacific framework](#)** where great power competition increasingly shapes maritime governance and security.



What is the Significance of the Indo-Pacific Region for India?

- **Maritime Security & Strategic Autonomy:** India's maritime security hinges on the Indo-Pacific, which hosts vital **Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)** through which most of India's trade and energy flow.
 - With increasing Chinese assertiveness, especially in the **South China Sea** and Indian Ocean, securing these waters is essential for national sovereignty and economic resilience. [India's SAGAR doctrine](#) reflects this maritime-first strategic outlook.
 - Over **95% of India's trade by volume** passes through the Indian Ocean. India has increased patrols near the [Strait of Hormuz](#) and **Malacca**, both critical Indo-Pacific chokepoints.
- **Economic Growth & Trade Diversification:** The Indo-Pacific is central to India's growth via economic partnership and integrated supply chains.
 - In an era of [China+1 strategies](#), India is leveraging this region to attract manufacturing, diversify trade, and deepen digital and green economy linkages.
 - Initiatives like IPEF and **FTAs with Australia and UAE** are part of this push.
 - India joined the [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework \(IPEF\)](#) in 2022, focusing on resilient supply chains.
- **Technology & Infrastructure Connectivity:** India is using the **Indo-Pacific** to promote infrastructure and digital connectivity aligned with its **Digital Public Infrastructure model**.
 - India has launched the [Global Digital Public Infrastructure Repository \(GDPIR\)](#), a virtual platform under its [G20 presidency](#), to facilitate the exchange of information and best practices on developing digital public infrastructure (DPI) at scale
 - The [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)](#), launched in **September 2023**, passes through the Indo-Pacific, linking India to Europe via the Gulf.
- **Climate Change & Blue Economy Leadership:** The Indo-Pacific is vulnerable to climate-induced disasters like **cyclones, sea-level rise, and coral loss**.
 - India is spearheading climate resilience efforts via IORA, the [Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure](#), and its leadership in the blue economy space.
 - This enhances **India's soft power and creates opportunities for sustainable**

maritime development and green finance.

- **Diplomatic & Normative Leadership:** The Indo-Pacific helps India position itself as a civilizational and democratic leader of the Global South.
 - Through **IORA chairmanship (2025-27)**, India is shaping regional norms around inclusivity, development, and sovereignty.
 - This also supports **India's UNSC and multilateral reform agenda**.
 - India hosted the [Voice of Global South Summit](#) in 2024 and championed the [New Delhi Leader's Declaration](#) under the G20 presidency, despite apprehensions about failure.

What are the Key Issues Hindering India's Active Engagements in the Indo-Pacific?

- **Strategic Resource Constraints:** India's capacity to project power across the Indo-Pacific is hampered by **limited naval resources, budgetary constraints, and logistical limitations**, especially compared to China and the US.
 - Despite growing ambitions, India lacks overseas military bases, long-range deployment capacity, and sustained funding for maritime dominance.
 - This restricts its **presence beyond the Indian Ocean**.
 - In 2023-24, the capital expenditure allocated to the armed forces closely matched their projected requirements. However, at the revised estimate stage, spending by the Army, Navy, and Air Force was 4% lower than the budget estimate.
 - In contrast, China's defence budget exceeded **7% in 2025** with active deployment in **Djibouti and Cambodia**.
- **Absence of Coherent Indo-Pacific Doctrine:** India lacks a singular, institutionalised Indo-Pacific policy framework to guide its strategic choices and alliances.
 - While the **SAGAR, Act East, and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative** exist, the absence of a unified doctrine reduces clarity for partners and leads to fragmented regional messaging.
 - This weakens India's leadership perception in multilateral forums.
 - Unlike the **US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022)** or **Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision**, India's approach remains a **patchwork of initiatives**.
- **Geopolitical Balancing Dilemma:** India's quest for strategic autonomy limits its ability to fully align with like-minded coalitions (e.g., [Quad](#), **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity**) against China's assertiveness.
 - Simultaneously engaging China diplomatically in forums like SCO and BRICS leads to ambiguity and slows decision-making. This **reduces India's reliability in high-stakes security alignments**.
 - India's strategic autonomy creates ambiguity in security alignments. Its cautious stance on [AUKUS](#) and continued defense ties with **Russia (S-400 deal despite CAATSA concerns)** show its balancing act.
- **Economic Hesitancy and Trade Reticence:** India's cautious trade posture—**seen in its RCEP withdrawal and limited FTA depth (data localisation clauses)**—has undermined its economic integration in the Indo-Pacific.
 - This **weakens India's credibility as a long-term trade partner** and reduces its leverage in regional economic diplomacy, especially compared to **ASEAN, China, and Japan**.
 - India pulled out of [RCEP](#) in 2019, and as of 2024, it has only **13 active FTAs**, far fewer than ASEAN.
 - On the other hand, **trade between ASEAN and China has more than doubled since 2010**, from USD 235.5 billion to USD 507.9 billion in 2019.
- **Limited Institutional Capacity in Regional Forums:** India's influence in Indo-Pacific institutions like **IORA, BIMSTEC, and IPOI** is undermined by **weak secretariats**, lack of dedicated funding, and bureaucratic sluggishness.
 - Despite having **visionary goals**, India often struggles with follow-through and operational delivery in regional capacity-building.
 - For instance, the budget of the Indian Ocean Rim Association happens to be just a few million. Incidentally, the **Indian Ocean Commission**, which has only five Indian ocean countries, has a **\$1.3 billion budget for the 2020-25 time**

frame.

- **Vulnerability to Domestic and Regional Disruptions:** India's Indo-Pacific focus is frequently disrupted by urgent domestic issues (e.g., border conflicts, economic downturns) and regional instability (e.g., in West Asia or Nepal). These limit sustained attention, dilute diplomatic bandwidth, and hinder consistent regional engagement.
 - The [Gaza conflict \(2023-25\)](#) and [Houthi disruptions in the Red Sea](#) directly impacted India's energy supply lines and cargo, forcing naval redeployments.
 - Meanwhile, tensions with **Canada and Maldives** in 2024 diverted diplomatic focus.
- **Inadequate Maritime Infrastructure and Connectivity:** India's **port infrastructure, coastal logistics, and shipbuilding capacity** remain underdeveloped compared to its Indo-Pacific peers, limiting both economic and strategic outreach.
 - Delays in **executing projects like Sagarmala** and **lack of deep-sea port** capabilities affect India's maritime trade and naval access.
 - This undercuts India's blue economy and connectivity ambitions.
 - India ranks **38th in the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (2023)**. [Chabahar Port](#), India's key strategic project, saw only partial operationalisation, while [China's Gwadar Port](#) received over **\$2.5 billion in fresh investment** under CPEC.

What are the Key Groupings of the Indo-Pacific that India is Part of?

- **Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)**
 - **Members:** India, USA, Japan, Australia
 - **Focus:** Strategic coordination, maritime security, supply chains, technology, climate, health
- **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)**
 - **Members:** 14 countries including India, US, Japan, Australia, South Korea, ASEAN nations
 - **Focus:** Trade, supply chain resilience, clean economy, fair economy (**India opted out of trade pillar**)
- **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**
 - **Members:** 23 member states across **Asia, Africa, Australia**
 - **Focus:** Maritime cooperation, blue economy, disaster management, capacity building
- **BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)**
 - **Members:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand
 - **Focus:** Regional connectivity, security cooperation, economic and technical collaboration
- **[Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative \(IPOI\)](#) (India-led)**
 - **Partners:** Voluntary partnership – **Australia, France, Japan and Indonesia have joined pillars**
 - **Focus:** Maritime ecology, connectivity, security, disaster risk reduction, blue economy

What Measures can India Adopt to Enhance its Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region?

- **Formulate a Comprehensive Indo-Pacific Grand Strategy:** India must integrate its multiple policy threads—[SAGAR](#), [Act East](#), IPOI, [Indo-Pacific Economic Framework \(IPEF\)](#)—into a unified **National Indo-Pacific Strategy**.
 - This strategy should clearly define India's interests, red lines, engagement tools, and sectoral priorities across the **maritime, economic, and normative spheres**.
 - A single, government-mandated doctrine would enhance internal coherence and external clarity.
 - This will also help **India project itself as a net security provider and regional stabiliser**.
- **Expand India's Naval Reach and Maritime Infrastructure:** To assert its maritime leadership,

India must expand its **naval operational footprint** across the Indo-Pacific by entering logistics-sharing agreements, establishing forward presence facilities, and modernising its fleet.

- Strengthening **Mission-Based Deployments**, enhancing underwater domain awareness, and securing access to island territories are essential for sea lane security.
- India should prioritise projects like **deep-sea ports, MDA networks, and coastal radar chains** in the Indian Ocean littorals.

- Such steps will **shift India from a coastal to a fully Indo-Pacific maritime power**.

- **Institutionalise Mini-lateral and Multilateral Leadership:** India should deepen its role in **Quad, IORA, IPOI, BIMSTEC**, and trilaterals like **India-France-Australia** by driving focused cooperation on maritime security, connectivity, critical technologies, and disaster response.
 - **Mini-lateral formats offer agility** without the rigidity of formal alliances and allow India to shape regional norms.
 - **India must also build coordination mechanisms** among these groupings to reduce duplication.

- Institutional depth multiplies India's diplomatic capital.

- **Deliver Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Initiatives:** India must scale up execution of strategic connectivity projects such as the **Chabahar Port, Kaladan Multi-Modal Project and India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)**.
 - These should be time-bound, quality-driven, and built around **local ownership and sustainability**.
 - India should also expand **Project Preparation and Delivery Units (PPDUs)** to fast-track infrastructure diplomacy.

- **Infrastructure delivery is the new currency of strategic influence.**

- **Champion a People-Centric Blue Economy and Climate Agenda:** India should take the lead in shaping an inclusive **Blue Economy architecture**, focusing on sustainable fisheries, marine conservation, ocean energy, and island livelihoods.

- It should embed **climate adaptation and coastal resilience** into regional cooperation, especially through IORA and IPOI.

- India's leadership in the **CDRI and [International Solar Alliance \(ISA\)](#)** can be linked to this regional agenda.

- This aligns **maritime diplomacy with climate justice** and sustainable development.

- **Reinvent Trade Diplomacy and Economic Integration:** India must take a calibrated but forward-leaning approach to economic integration in the Indo-Pacific.

- This includes deepening FTAs with ASEAN, Australia, UAE, and actively engaging in **IPEF's trade, digital, and supply chain pillars**.

- Strengthening value chains in **semiconductors, rare earths, green technologies**, and pharmaceuticals can position India as a trusted alternative to China.

- Institutional trade capacity, customs reforms, and trade facilitation should accompany these efforts.

- **Operationalise IPOI into a Flagship Regional Platform:** The **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)** must transition from conceptual vision to operational platform with **defined roadmaps, anchor countries, and project pipelines** for each thematic pillar.

- India should establish a **secretariat, funding mechanism, and expert task forces** under IPOI to coordinate policy, research, and training.

- **Structure turns intent into impact.** This will institutionalise India's leadership on maritime governance and environmental norms.

- As **India's foreign affairs minister** stated in [Raisina Dialogue 2025](#): "If you don't have an order, then you are looking at a very anarchic world".

- **Leverage Cultural, Educational, and Diaspora Diplomacy:** India must invest in long-term **soft power** tools by building educational, cultural, and digital linkages with Indo-Pacific nations.

- Creating **maritime-focused research hubs**, offering scholarships on Blue Economy and strategic studies, and promoting cultural exchanges can deepen trust.

- **India's diaspora in Southeast Asia, Australia, and Gulf countries** should be mobilised as strategic assets.

- Launching **"Indo-Pacific Chairs"** at universities and think tanks can internationalise India's worldview.

Conclusion:

India's Indo-Pacific engagement is at a **critical juncture, requiring a coherent strategy, enhanced maritime capacity, and deeper regional integration**. As IORA chair (2025–27), India must lead on **security, trade, and connectivity** while balancing strategic autonomy with effective partnerships. Strengthening institutional frameworks and economic diplomacy will solidify India's role as a key Indo-Pacific power.

Drishti Mains Question:

Discuss the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region for India. What challenges hinder India's proactive engagement in the region, and how can India enhance its role as a key player in Indo-Pacific geopolitics?

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Questions (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. With reference to “Look East Policy” of India, consider the following statements: (2011)

1. India wants to establish itself as an important regional player in East Asian affairs.
2. India wants to plug the vacuum created by the termination of the Cold War.
3. India wants to restore the historical and cultural ties with its neighbors in Southeast and East Asia.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q1. The new tri-nation partnership AUKUS is aimed at countering China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. Is it going to supersede the existing partnerships in the region? Discuss the strength and impact of AUKUS in the present scenario. (2021)