



Strategic Importance of IOR

1. The Indian Ocean Region

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean of the world and covers nearly 20% of water surface.

- The Indian Ocean Region can be roughly identified as follows: Its western border is continental Africa to a longitude of 20° E, where it stretches south from Cape Agulhas; its northern border is continental Asia from Suez to the Malay Peninsula; in the east it incorporates Singapore, the Indonesian archipelago, Australia to longitude 147° E and Tasmania; while in the south it stretches to latitude 60° S as determined per the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.
- The region has 51 coastal and landlocked states, namely 26 Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) states, five Red Sea states, four Persian Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, France, Britain and 13 landlocked states.
- Four critically important access waterways are the Suez Canal (Egypt), Bab el Mandeb (Djibouti-Yemen), Strait of Hormuz (Iran-Oman), and Strait of Malacca (Indonesia-Malaysia).
- major seaports are: Chennai (Madras, India); Colombo (Sri Lanka); Durban (South Africa); Jakarta (Indonesia); Kolkata (Calcutta, India); Melbourne (Australia); Mumbai (Bombay, India); Richards Bay (South Africa).



2. Reasons behind the increased importance of Indian Ocean Region

Indian Ocean countries have a long history of trade, culture and military interaction with the rest of the world. Today the Indian Ocean's traditional status as an international trade highway is more significant than ever before, while international military presence in the ocean is unprecedented.

- The region contains 1/3 of the world's population, 25% of its landmass, 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves.
- The sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are considered among the most strategically important in the world. More than 80 % of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 % passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 % through the Strait of Malacca and 8 % through the Bab el-Mandab Strait.
- The Indian Ocean is an area of conflict. Some conflicts are internal and remain localised, but other local and regional conflicts are of global significance and are prone to foreign political and military interference. Some notable conflict areas are Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.
- Though the causes of these conflicts vary, many can be associated with weak or failed states, significant levels of poverty, poorly developed institutions, the absence of democracy, corruption, competition for scarce resources, interference by foreign powers, the global war on terror and what can be termed 'turbulence' in the Islamic world.
- The region is home to continually evolving strategic developments including the competing rises of China and India, potential nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan, the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamist terrorism, growing incidence of piracy in and around the Horn of Africa, and management of diminishing fishery resources.
- Almost all the world's major powers have deployed substantial military forces in the Indian Ocean region. The US 5th Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, and uses the island of Diego Garcia as a major air-naval base and logistics hub for its Indian Ocean operations. France maintain a significant presence in the north and southwest Indian Ocean quadrants, with naval bases in Djibouti, Reunion, and Abu Dhabi.
- The region is rich in energy resources and minerals such as gold, tin, uranium, cobalt, nickel, aluminium and cadmium, and also contains abundant fishing resources.
- Roughly 55 per cent of known oil reserves and 40 per cent of gas reserves are in the Indian Ocean region. The Gulf and Arab states produce around 21 per cent of the world's oil, with daily crude exports of up to 17,262 million barrels representing about 43 per cent of international exports.
- The Indian Ocean has some of the world's most important choke points, notably the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and the Bab el Mandeb. As these choke points are strategically important for global trade and energy flow, a number of extra-regional states maintain a naval presence in the Indian Ocean.
- Although the number of reported incidents of piracy have dropped dramatically in 2012, the International Maritime Bureau continues to report the territorial waters of littoral states and offshore waters as high risk for piracy and armed robbery against ships, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, along the east coast of Africa and the Strait of Malacca.
- China's aggressive soft power diplomacy has widely been seen as arguably the most important element in shaping the Indian Ocean strategic environment, transforming the entire region's dynamics. By providing large loans on generous repayment terms, investing in major infrastructure projects such as the building of roads, dams, ports, power plants, and railways, and offering military assistance and political support in the UN Security Council through its veto powers, China has secured considerable goodwill and influence among countries in the Indian Ocean region.
- The increased significance of Indian Ocean Region in the world geopolitics is one of the reasons behind the "Pivot to Asia" policy of the Obama Administration. The pivot is meant to be a strategic "re-balancing" of U.S. interests from Europe and the Middle East toward Asia and Pacific.

3. Significance of Indian Ocean for India

The Indian Ocean encompasses about one-fifth of the world's sea area and the Indian Peninsula extends two thousand kilometres into the sea, bringing approximately 50 percent of the Indian Ocean within a 1000-mile arc ascribed from Indian Territory. This provides for a dominant position for India in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Its national and economic interests are inseparably linked up with Indian Ocean.

Writing in the 1940s, KM Pannikar argued that “while to other countries the Indian Ocean is only one of the important oceanic areas, to India it is a vital sea. Her lifelines are concentrated in that area, her freedom is dependent on the freedom of that water surface.”

India's objectives in the Indian Ocean Region

- Attempting to spread its influence across the entire Indian Ocean Region, through trade and investment, diplomacy and strategic partnerships
- Upgrading relations with Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia; regions that hold mineral deposits and energy reserves critical to India's economic development and great power aspirations
- Positioning itself to emerge as the dominant Indian Ocean power in the decades ahead
- Ensuring that China does not gain a significant strategic foothold in the region
- Strengthening influence and control over Indian Ocean choke points through security relationships with key littoral states such as Singapore, Mauritius and Oman

India imports about 70% of its oil through the Indian Ocean Region to its various ports. 90% of India's international trade by volume is dependent on sea. India has been enhancing its strategic influence through the use of soft power, by becoming a major foreign investor in regional mining, oil, gas and infrastructure projects.

4. Regional, sub-regional and multinational cooperation

The Indian Ocean region is noted for its complex sub-regional geopolitical and geostrategic associations, each with its own vested interest. Cooperation occurs mostly in the spheres of economy and trade, rather than in security, and is to a large extent hampered by distrust and lack of interaction. The following are the most pertinent examples of regional and sub-regional cooperation:

- The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC): IOR-ARC was established in Mauritius in March 1997 and a Charter was adopted. The Association comprises 20 member states and six dialogue partners, the Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation and the Indian Ocean Research Group has observer status. The aim of IOR-ARC is to open the region based on four major components: trade liberalisation, trade and investment facilitation, economic and technical cooperation, and trade and investment dialogue. It does not address defence and security cooperation directly as the aim of 'open and free trade' implies maritime security.
- The 'Indian Ocean Naval Symposium' (IONS): IONS is a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime co-operation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region. The objectives of the IONS are to expand it to the next level of cooperation, create allied maritime agencies, establish a high degree of interoperability, share information to overcome common trans-national maritime threats and natural disasters, and maintain good order at sea. The group has 35 members.
- The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): The GCC was established in 1981 in response to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. Its objectives are to strengthen co-operation in agriculture, trade, industry, investment and security among its six member states.
- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): SAARC was established in December 1985 to work towards economic and social development. Maritime cooperation is not part of the agreement. The member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN): ASEAN was established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Since then, membership has expanded to include Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. ASEAN leaders resolved in 2003 that ASEAN should rest on three pillars, namely an ASEAN security community, an economic community and a socio-cultural community.
- The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): The ARF comprises 27 countries, namely the ten ASEAN members and 17 'partner states'. The ARF is the principal forum for security discourse between Asian states and

provides the opportunity to discuss regional security issues and develop cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region.

- Southern African Development Community (SADC): The SADC Treaty, signed by members in Windhoek, Namibia, on 17 August 1992, was put into force on 30 September 1993. SADC has 14 member states of which South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius and Tanzania are also IOR-ARC members. The SADC Standing Maritime Committee has the aim of promoting regional peace and prosperity through maritime military co-operation.
- East African Community (EAC): The EAC is a regional intergovernmental organisation headquartered in Arusha, Tanzania, with Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi as members. It aims to improve political, economic and social development, and has the ultimate objective of establishing a political federation of East African states.
- Indian Ocean Commission (COI): The COI (Commission de l'océan indien in French) is an intergovernmental organisation created in 1984 with the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, France and the Seychelles as members.
- The Arab League, or League of Arabian States: The league was formed in Cairo in March 1945 and is the regional organisation of Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa. Its current membership comprises 22 states.
- The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC): The OIC was initially founded in 1969 and its membership grew to 30 states. Its aims centre on the promotion of Islamic solidarity and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and scientific fields.
- The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA): The FPDA is a defence relationship based on a series of bilateral agreements between the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore dating from 1971. The FPDA makes provision for defence cooperation.

Copyright © by Vision IAS

All rights are reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of Vision IAS.