

## **1. India's Strategy in Indian Ocean Region**

**Prelims Level: International**

**Mains Level: GS-II India and its Neighbourhood- Relations**

**Context:**

- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar while addressing the Delhi Dialogue conference told that one of the problems in building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific maritime region was the lack of consensus on the concept of security and geographic extent.



**Background:**

- The Indian Ocean is **third largest water body** of the world that has vital sea lanes of communication crisscrossing it and which feeds Asia's largest economies.
- More than 80 percent of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points through **the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the Bab el-Mandab Strait.**

- Indian Ocean Region **has around 40% of total world population**, with countries having fastest growing population.
- According to the **Fragile States Index** (2013-19), the three of the top 5 fragile states are located in the Indian Ocean Region.

### **Importance of Indian Ocean Region (IOR):**

- It has **around 40% of the world's oil and gas reserves**, and controls a large quantum of the global trade.
- The Indian Ocean contains 60 per cent of uranium, 40 per cent of gold, and 98 per cent of the world's supply of diamonds.
- The region has vast **marine food potentiality**, it has been estimated that it contains more than 12 million tons of catch fish.
- The **mineral resources**, especially those which are vital for the defence-related industries, is an important factor that has made Africa strategically important for the western powers.
- The **raw materials and agricultural products**, also make it important source region.
- The region is critical for global trade and commerce, as it **links the West to the East**.

### **Importance for India:**

- The **polymetallic nodules** in the deep sea-beds are a rich source of metals containing manganese, nickel, cobalt, copper and uranium. India is one of very few countries in the world to have developed the technology to extract minerals from the deep sea bed.
- The Indian peninsula lies surrounded by the Indian Ocean in its three sides, a reality that has **strategic implications**.
- India **imports 70 % of its oil requirements**, which is met through maritime imports.
- **Almost 95 % of Indian trade** moves by sea, and the living marine resources helps in achieving food security.
- With India moving towards **Blue Economy**- the stability, peace and sustainability is essential for India's growth and development.

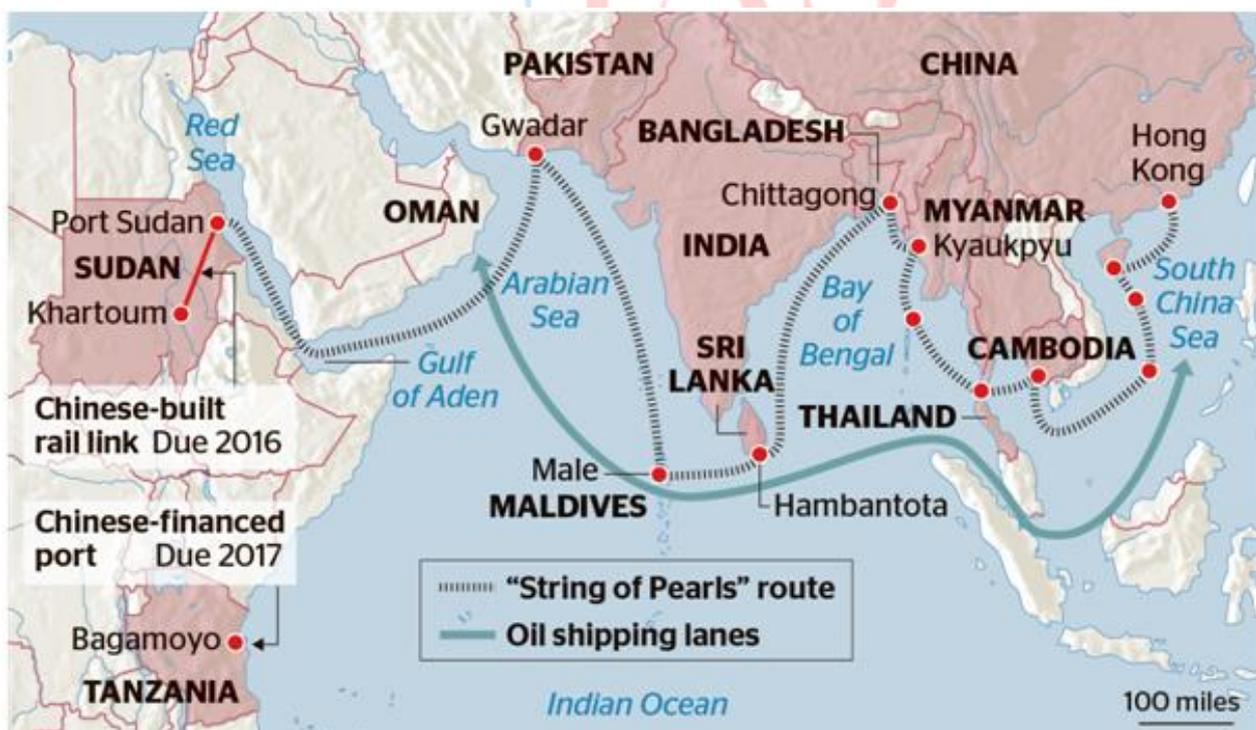
### **Issues in Indian Ocean Region (IOR):**

- **Piracy** - Although the number of reported incidents of piracy have dropped dramatically since 2012, the International Maritime Bureau reports 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.

- **Presence of China-** Aggressive soft power diplomacy (through infrastructure projects, soft loans and its Belt and Road Initiative), China has secured considerable goodwill and influence among countries in the Indian Ocean region.
- China is also engaging in a **String of Pearls strategy** to surround India, by building ports and military establishments in the littoral countries.
- **Traditional challenges-** maritime boundary, border issues between the countries surrounding the ocean.
- **Non-traditional challenges-** the issue of maritime governance - biodiversity threats, climate change, sea level changes, human trafficking, piracy, maritime terrorism and unscientific fishing.

### Is China a biggest challenge for India?

- **India-China disputes** were largely a land-air contingency. Now, the presence of China in the IOR adds the third dimension (Maritime).
- As China is improving its naval capacity, showcasing its power has seen a shift from Indo-pacific towards IOR.
- Gwadar Port of Pakistan, under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is considered to be a threat to the India's interests in Iran's Chabahar Port.



- China has signed a 10-year contract with **Djibouti** under which, Djibouti would serve “as a logistics hub for China to be able to extend their reach”.



### India's View of IOR:

- India is concerned about the **growing naval power of China** in the Indian Ocean Region. This might affect the peace and stability in the region.
- As the littoral countries (mostly former colonies) are striving to improve their development, ‘**debt-traps**’ by **China** may affect their economies, which are contagious.
- As the western nations bring broader context to the region by including the Pacific region (**Indo-Pacific**), India stands for a separate concern towards the Indian Ocean Region.
- Indian Ocean countries want a **free and open IOR** and India is seen as an important regional player which can take forward the idea.

### What does ‘Free and Open IOR’ mean?

- Freedom of Navigation
- Rule of Law
- Obeying the International Conventions
- Lack of coercion by other nations
- Free Economic Trade

## Is IOR ready for 'Free and Open'?

- The region has developing countries, which may face unfair competition.
- Maritime governance – in the region is under-developed.
- Extra regional actors like China and the US may have upper hand.
- Issue of human trafficking is unaddressed
- Climate Change is threatening the Island nations
- Damages to the bio-diversity is increasing particularly in the least developed countries.

## India's Presence in Indian Ocean Region:

- India has started a series of exercises with regional navies and extra regional navies in the region. For example:
  - ❖ AUSINDEX - India and Australia
  - ❖ Varuna - India and France
  - ❖ Milan - Multilateral naval exercise
  - ❖ Malabar - United States, Japan and India
- Anti-submarine exercise with the U.S. Navy near Diego Garcia.
- The Indian Navy has also played a prominent role in the fight against non-traditional challenges in the Indian Ocean –
  - ✓ The counter-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia
  - ✓ Humanitarian assistance
  - ✓ Disaster relief (relief operations in cyclone-hit Mozambique)
- South Asian navies also have been making their presence felt in the seas of the subcontinent.

## Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA):

- The Indian Ocean Rim Association is an inter-governmental organisation which was established on 7 March 1997.
- IORA's apex body is the Council of Foreign Ministers (COM) which meets annually.
- IORA is a dynamic organisation of 22 Member States and 9 Dialogue Partners, for mutually beneficial regional cooperation through a consensus-based, evolutionary and non-intrusive approach.
- India is a member of IORA.
- Indian Ocean cooperation is weak relative to Atlantic and Pacific initiatives. There is a place for leadership role for India, being the largest player in the region.

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- India must continue to strengthen its ties in the region – such as with Australia and Indonesia – and also build new connections, particularly in Africa. India could focus more on how to promote the Indian Ocean, with cooperation from the other countries in the region

