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INDIAN OCEAN REGION**SYLLABUS:**

GS 2 > International relations > India and Global Regions > International groupings

REFERENCE NEWS:

- Recently, a report by the **Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs** highlighted that the increasing **presence of extra-regional actors**, particularly **China's growing foothold in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, poses a significant strategic challenge for India.

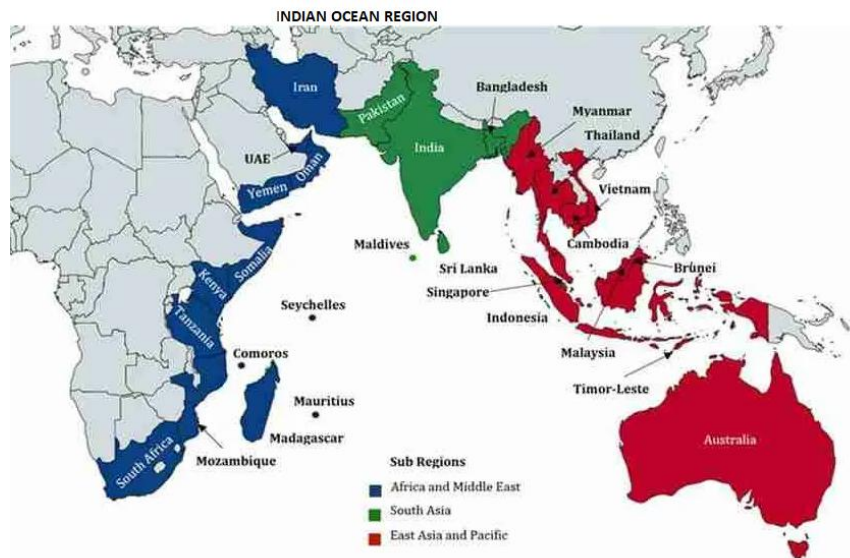
KEY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT:

- **China's Expanding Presence in the IOR: A Strategic Challenge:**
- The report identifies **China's growing strategic footprint** in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as a major geopolitical challenge for India.
- It highlights that **extra-regional powers**, particularly China, are gaining footholds through infrastructure investments and naval deployments.
- **Dual-Use Infrastructure and Surveillance Activities**
- China is developing **dual-use infrastructure** (civilian and military) like ports, airports, and logistics facilities in IOR littoral states.
- These developments enable China to conduct **surveillance, maritime domain awareness operations, and collect sensitive oceanographic data** through research and survey vessels.
- **Naval Expansion and Forward Military Presence**
- China has expanded its naval footprint by **increasing both the number and duration of its vessel deployments** in the IOR.
- This expansion is supported by:
 - **Military base in Djibouti (established in 2017).**
 - **Logistics-support infrastructure** near key maritime choke points such as the Strait of Malacca and Bab el-Mandeb.
- **China's Engagement with India's Neighbours**

- China has been building strategic port infrastructure in **countries near India's maritime boundary**, such as Sri Lanka and Maldives.
- Despite these moves, the Indian government emphasizes that **bilateral relations with IOR countries are based on mutual trust**, independent of those countries' ties with China.
- Notably, **Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake** reaffirmed in Dec 2024 that Sri Lanka would not allow its territory to be used against India's security interests.
- **India's Diplomatic Countermeasures**
- India is proactively engaging with IOR nations to **sensitise them about China's long-term intentions**.
- Efforts are underway to **enhance regional maritime cooperation**, and build strategic trust through diplomacy and development partnerships.
- **India's Position on BRI and Debt-Trap Diplomacy**
- The report reiterates India's **principled opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**.
- Key concerns include:
 - **Inclusion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, which passes through Pakistan-occupied territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.
 - CPEC is viewed as a violation of **India's sovereignty and territorial integrity**.
 - India has **officially conveyed its objections** to China multiple times.
- **Militarisation of the IOR: India's Concerns**
- The committee strongly opposes the **militarisation of the IOR**, warning of its **adverse impact on regional security and Indo-Pacific stability**.
- It calls for a **rules-based maritime order**, aligning with India's broader vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific.
- **Strategic Significance of Xinjiang in China's IOB Engagement**
- Xinjiang is described as a **gateway for the BRI**, sharing borders with 8 countries and enabling overland trade and connectivity.
- It plays a critical role in China's continental outreach, complementing its maritime strategy in the IOR.

INDIAN OCEAN REGION:

- The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a vast maritime expanse bordered by Asia to the north, Africa to the west, Australia to the east, and the Southern Ocean to the south. It encompasses critical sea lanes that facilitate approximately **75% of the world's maritime trade**



and 50% of daily global oil consumption. The region is home to diverse nations and territories, including key **subregions such as South Asia, the Middle East, the eastern coast of Africa, and numerous islands.** Given its strategic importance, the IOR has become a focal point for geopolitical competition, maritime security concerns, and collaborative economic initiatives.

IMPORTANCE OF INDIAN OCEAN FOR INDIA:

- **Long Maritime Boundary:**
 - With a coastline of over 7,500 km, India has a natural interest in enhancing maritime security.
- **Securing Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC):**
 - The Indian Ocean region transports **75% of the world's maritime trade and 50% of daily global oil consumption.**
 - **Three major SLOCs play a crucial role** in the energy security and economic prosperity:
 1. **SLOC connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean** through the **Bab al-Mandab** (that transports the bulk of Asia's international trade with its major trading partners in Europe and America),
 2. **SLOC connecting the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean** through the **Strait of Hormuz** (transporting the bulk of energy exports to major import destinations like India, ASEAN, and East Asia)
 3. **SLOC connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans** through the **Straits of Malacca** (integral to the smooth flow of trade with ASEAN, East Asia, Russia's Far East and the US).
- **Energy security:**

- **India imports nearly 80% of its oil through the Indian Ocean**, making uninterrupted maritime access crucial for sustaining its energy needs.
- **Trade security:**
 - Almost **95% of India's trade by volume and 68% of trade by value are routed via the Indian Ocean**. Any impediment to flow of commercial traffic would have disastrous ramifications on her economic objectives.
- **Geostrategic position:**
 - Indian Ocean **encompasses about 1/5th of the world's sea area** and the **Indian Peninsula extends 2000 kms into the sea**, bringing approximately **50% of the Indian Ocean within a 1000-mile arc** ascribed from Indian Territory. This central position enables India to take up the role of a net security provider in the region.
- **Changing geo-politics:**
 - The **relative decline of the U.S.** in the region has created a power vacuum, which **is now being filled by both India and China**, each seeking to establish itself as a key player.
 - The rise of the Indo-Pacific concept has gained traction in recent years, linking the western Pacific with the Indian Ocean as a single strategic entity due to shifting geopolitical interests.
- **Rise of Indo Pacific:**
 - The **acceptance of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic construct linking the contiguous waters of the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean** has gained currency in the last few years with the **shift in the geopolitical centre of gravity to IOR region**.
- **EEZ and Ocean resource:**
 - **Fishing and aquaculture**
 - Indian Ocean accounts for almost **15% of the world's total fishing potential**.
 - **Other biological resources:**
 - **Coral reefs and mangroves** provide essential marine biodiversity.
 - **Oil and gas:**
 - Persian Gulf is the largest oil-producing region in the world.
 - Exploration for offshore petroleum and natural gas also has been under way in the **Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal**.
 - **Other minerals of potential commercial value**

- Ilmenite, tin, monazite (a rare earth), zircon, and chromite, all of which are **found in nearshore sand bodies**.
- **Polymetallic nodules:**
 - Polymetallic nodules are **abundant in the Indian Ocean**.
 - For example, Manganese nodules are found throughout the central part of the ocean, South Australian Basin etc.

Mineral exploration:

- In 1987, India received **exclusive rights to explore the Central Indian Ocean** and has since explored four million square miles and **established two mining sites**.
- In 2014, the **International Seabed Authority** issued licenses for the Indian Ocean ridge, **opening up new opportunities for deep seabed mining**.

- **Ecological importance:**
 - The Indian Ocean region also **remains a biodiversity hotspot**, one that is home to several million species of flora and fauna.
- **Dependence of Indian economy on Monsoon:**
 - The Indian Ocean has an important role to play in keeping the moderate climate of Southern India. Also, **Indian agriculture is mostly dependent on South-West monsoon. Hence, climatic sustainability of the regions** is a prime concern for India.
- **Tourism potential:**
 - A growing number of locations in the Indian Ocean have become **popular destinations for tourists**, who are drawn to the **warm climate, beautiful beaches, and azure waters**.
 - India sports many locations on both the mainland and in the island territories of **Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands** that draw large numbers of domestic as well as foreign visitors.

INDIAN INITIATIVES FOR INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR):

Policies

- **Neighbourhood First Policy & SAGAR (Security & Growth for All in the Region):**
- India as a **net security provider** in IOR.
- Enhancing **maritime security** and **economic resilience** of friendly nations.
- Ensuring **consultative, transparent, and cooperative** regional engagement.
- **MAHASAGAR Initiative (2025):**

- Elevates SAGAR into **Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions**, targeting the broader Global South.
- Champions cooperative maritime security, sustainable infrastructure, blue economy, digital connectivity, and climate resilience, serving as a transparent alternative to China's BRI.

Institutions

- **IOR Division (MEA):** Focuses on Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles.

Strategic Efforts

- **Necklace of Diamonds Strategy:** Counter to China's **String of Pearls**, expanding **naval bases** and alliances.
- **India's Overseas Military Bases:**
- **Changi (Singapore):** Naval access for refueling and rearming.
- **Sabang (Indonesia):** Military access at Malacca Strait.
- **Duqm (Oman):** Strategic positioning between Chinese bases in Djibouti and Gwadar.
- **Assumption Island (Seychelles):** Naval base to counter China's expansion.
- **Chabahar (Iran):** Access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- **Farkhor (Tajikistan):** Indian airbase.
- **Surveillance Radars:** Installed in **Mauritius & Seychelles**.

Military Engagements

- **Exercises:** Malabar (with US, Japan, Australia), Ekuverin (Maldives), Lamitye (Seychelles).
- **Military Assistance:**
- **Indian warship Sunanya** escorts food aid to Africa.
- **Maldives co-opted** into India's Southern Naval Command.
- **Anti-Piracy Operations:**
- **Indian Navy patrolling since 2008** in the Gulf of Aden.
- **P8I aircraft surveillance** in piracy-prone areas.
- **Humanitarian Assistance (HADR):**
- **Mozambique cyclone relief, water supply to Maldives, aid to Madagascar.**
- **Tsunami Warning System** for IOR.

Commitment to International Law

- India **accepted UNCLOS** arbitration on maritime disputes with Bangladesh.

Maritime Data Sharing

- **International Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram** for regional security coordination.

India-led Projects in IOR

- **Project Mausam:** Reviving **maritime cultural ties** with 39 IOR nations.

- **Sagarmala:** Developing **14 coastal economic zones** for port-led growth.
- **Mineral Exploration:** ISA granted India **1.5 lakh sq km** for seabed nodule exploration.
- **Resource Sharing:** Logistics projects in **Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles.**
- **Logistics Agreements:** Access to **Djibouti, Reunion Islands, Diego Garcia** via **France & USA.**
- Participation in Multilateral Forums**
- **IORA:** India as a **founding member** for regional cooperation.
- **IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium):** Indian Navy-led maritime security forum.
- **Indian Ocean Commission (Observer Status):** Engagement with **Western Indian Ocean islands.**
- **Colombo Security Conclave:** India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius.
- **QUAD:** India, US, Japan, Australia – ensuring a **free Indo-Pacific.**
- **Asia-Africa Growth Corridor:** Indo-Japanese initiative for **quality infrastructure in Africa.**
- **Indian Ocean Conference (IOC):** Launched by India Foundation in 2016, IOC is a key forum for dialogue on **maritime security and regional cooperation.** The 7th edition (Feb 2024, Perth) focused on “Towards a Stable and Sustainable Indian Ocean.”
- Space Initiatives for IOR**
- **South Asia Satellite:** ISRO project for SAARC nations.
- **IRNSS-NavIC:** Regional navigation system.
- Assisting Littoral States During Political Crises**
- **Operation Cactus (1988):** Military intervention in Maldives to counter a coup attempt.

CHALLENGES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR):

- **Piracy:**
 - Piracy remains a significant security concern, particularly in the **Gulf of Aden, Somali Coast, Omani Coast,** and waters between the African coastline and the Maldives.
 - These incidents threaten vital trade routes and **endanger merchant vessels navigating the Indian Ocean.**
- **Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing:**
 - IUU fishing is a growing concern, particularly due to **China's unregulated fishing activities** in the Indian Ocean.
 - According to the **Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), 379 IUU fishing incidents** were reported in IOR and adjacent waters in 2020.
- **Drug Trafficking:**

- **The Southern Route** is a well-established maritime corridor for smuggling **opioids** produced in **Central Asia**, transported via **the Arabian Sea** towards **both western and eastern destinations**.
- In the **east**, drugs transit through **India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives**, before reaching international markets.
- The **Golden Crescent** (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) and the **Golden Triangle** (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos) are the **two primary opium production hubs** impacting drug trafficking in IOR.
- **Human Trafficking:**
 - **Trafficking in persons (TiP) and smuggling of migrants (SoM)** are well-documented issues in the IOR.
 - Unregulated migration poses **security risks** and **humanitarian concerns**, especially for coastal nations with porous maritime borders.
- **Terrorism:**
 - Maritime routes are being exploited for **terrorist activities**, as seen in the **2008 Mumbai attacks**, where terrorists infiltrated India via the sea.
 - The presence of **radical extremist networks** using IOR routes for arms smuggling and terror financing remains a serious concern.
- **Chinese Maritime Expansion:**
 - **Debt-Trap Diplomacy:** China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** has led to **debt dependency** among strategically located IOR nations, forcing them into decisions favoring Chinese interests.
 - **String of Pearls Strategy:** China is expanding its presence in the IOR through **strategically placed ports and bases** in:
 - **Chittagong (Bangladesh)**
 - **Karachi and Gwadar (Pakistan)**
 - **Colombo and Hambantota (Sri Lanka)**
 - **Djibouti (Africa)**
 - Satellite images indicate **China's military base in Djibouti** is being modernized to strengthen its naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean.
 - **Territorial Influence Expansion:** The UK's decision to **return the Chagos Islands to Mauritius** raises concerns over potential **Chinese involvement** in the region near **Diego Garcia**, a strategic U.S. and Indian military base.
- **Middle East/West Asia Conflict:**
 - **Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East** have **severe maritime consequences** in the IOR, leading to:

- **Disruptions in global shipping lanes** such as the **Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz**.
- **Rising shipping costs and economic instability** for IOR nations reliant on energy imports and exports.
- **Climate Change:**
 - **Rising Temperatures & Extreme Weather:** The **Indian Ocean is warming three times faster than the Pacific Ocean**, leading to **more frequent and intense cyclones**. **Sea levels are rising at 3.7mm annually**, threatening **coastal erosion and increased flooding** across IOR nations.
 - **Marine Ecosystem Degradation:** Pollution and **overfishing** are **depleting marine resources**, impacting **fishing communities** and regional food security.
- **Resource Constraints:**
 - India's ambition to be a **net security provider** in IOR requires **substantial military investments**, placing pressure on **defense budgets and infrastructure capabilities**.
 - Increasing demand for **advanced naval assets**, including submarines and surveillance systems, is necessary to maintain **maritime superiority** in IOR.
- **Shifting U.S. Indo-Pacific Policy:**
 - The **uncertainty in U.S. Indo-Pacific commitments** could create a **strategic vacuum**, allowing China to expand its influence in IOR.
 - A **weaker U.S. presence** would **increase the risk of maritime conflicts** between India and China, either directly or in collaboration with Pakistan.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Strengthening Island Infrastructure & Strategic Bases:**
 - **Developing Andaman, Nicobar, and Lakshadweep** as strategic military and logistical hubs to enhance India's maritime presence.
 - Expanding naval facilities, surveillance systems, and maritime logistics to counter regional security threats.
- **Formulating a Comprehensive Maritime Security Strategy**
 - **Drafting a National Defence Policy** that reinforces India's role as a **net security provider** in IOR.
 - Strengthening **coastal defense, naval modernization, and blue-water capabilities** to safeguard India's maritime interests.
- **Enhancing International Cooperation & Multilateral Engagement**
 - **Deepening partnerships** through initiatives like **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Colombo Security Conclave, and QUAD**.

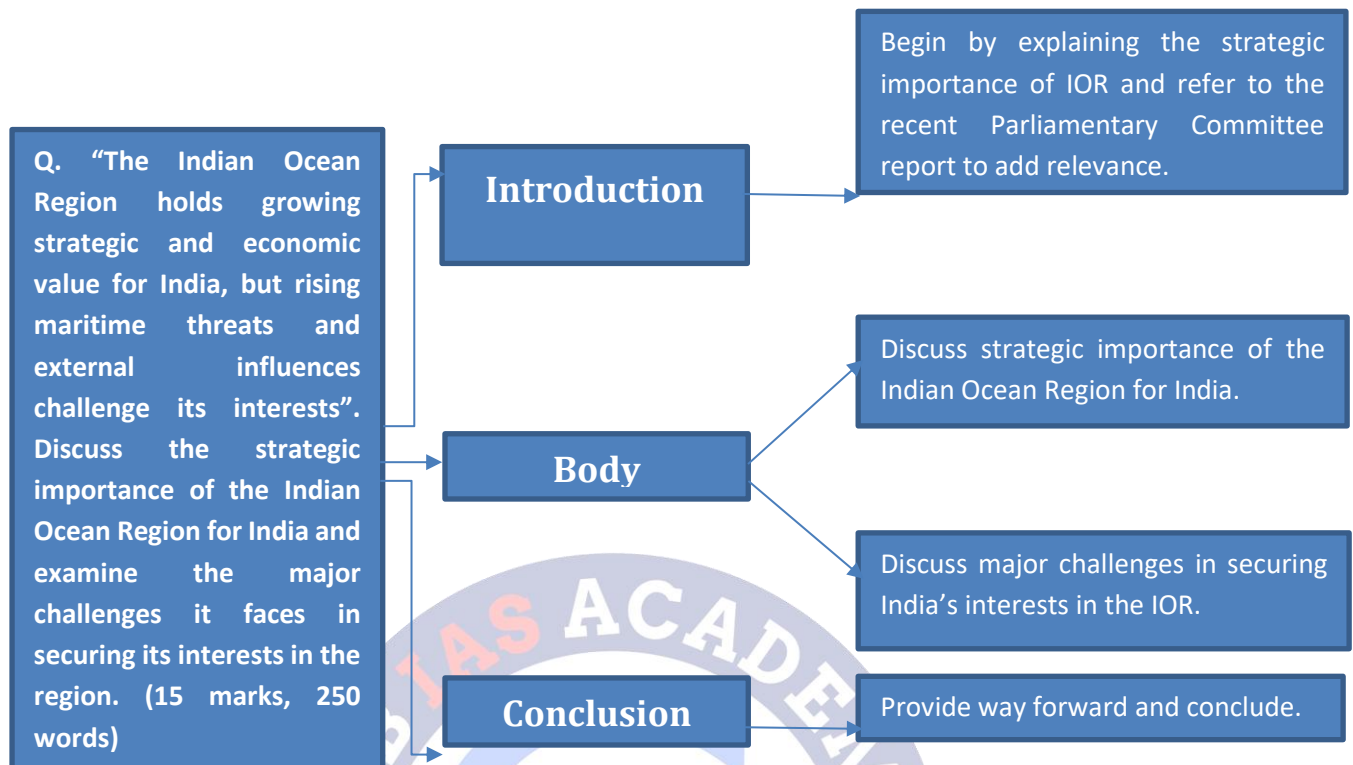
- Strengthening security ties with **littoral states and key strategic partners** for intelligence-sharing and coordinated maritime security.
- **Ensuring Freedom of Navigation & Securing SLOCs**
 - Advocating for a **rules-based maritime order** under **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**.
 - Deploying **joint patrols and surveillance operations** to counter piracy, illegal fishing, and maritime terrorism.
- **Blue Economy & Sustainable Development**
 - Promoting **sustainable marine resource management** through enhanced fisheries, deep-sea mining, and environmental conservation.
 - Supporting **regional coastal economies** via initiatives like **Project Mausam** and **Sagarmala** to boost connectivity and trade.
- **Engaging the Private Sector & Technological Advancement**
 - Encouraging **private sector investments** in **port infrastructure, maritime logistics, and shipping industries**.
 - Enhancing **maritime domain awareness (MDA)** with **AI-driven surveillance, satellite tracking, and naval tech innovation**.
- **Climate Resilience & Disaster Preparedness**
 - Strengthening **Tsunami Warning Systems** and disaster relief frameworks for IOR nations.
 - Implementing climate adaptation policies to mitigate **rising sea levels, extreme weather, and marine ecosystem degradation**.

CONCLUSION

- To retain strategic influence in the Indian Ocean Region, India must adopt a multi-pronged approach—**strengthening maritime security, deepening regional ties, and advancing technological capabilities**. The recent Parliamentary Committee report highlights China's growing presence and the risks of militarisation. India must counter this through vigilant diplomacy, capacity-building in littoral states, and promotion **of a rules-based, cooperative maritime order**.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. "The Indian Ocean Region holds growing strategic and economic value for India, but rising maritime threats and external influences challenge its interests". Discuss the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region for India and examine the major challenges it faces in securing its interests in the region. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:MODEL ANSWER:

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a strategic priority for India due to its **economic vitality, maritime chokepoints, and geopolitical competition**. A **Parliamentary Standing Committee report (June 2025)** warned of **China’s deepening foothold in the IOR** through dual-use infrastructure, militarisation, and strategic engagement with India’s neighbours—highlighting the growing external challenges to India’s maritime interests.

Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean Region for India:

1. **Trade and Energy Lifeline:** 95% of India’s trade by volume and 80% of oil imports move through the IOR.
2. **Control Over Strategic Chokepoints:** Proximity to Bab el-Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, and Malacca enhances India’s leverage in global trade routes.
3. **Geostrategic Centrality:** The Indian Peninsula juts 2,000 km into the ocean, placing nearly 50% of the IOR within a 1,000-mile arc.
4. **Net Security Provider Role:** India is seen as a stabilising force, supporting littoral nations through SAGAR and Neighbourhood First policies.
5. **Resource Potential and Blue Economy:** Rich in fish, hydrocarbons, polymetallic nodules; India has mining rights over 1.5 lakh sq km from the ISA.
6. **Monsoon and Climate Regulation:** The Indian Ocean directly influences monsoon patterns critical for India’s agriculture.

7. **Strategic Alliances and Engagements:** India has signed logistics pacts with France and the US, developed bases in Chabahar, Duqm, and has observer status in Indian Ocean Commission.

Major Challenges in Securing India's Interests in the IOR:

1. **Chinese Maritime Expansion:** China's String of Pearls strategy and bases (Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota) pose encirclement risks.
2. **Debt-Trap Diplomacy:** China's BRI projects like CPEC infringe on Indian sovereignty and foster dependency among IOR nations.
3. **Surveillance and Militarisation:** Chinese survey vessels and dual-use port infrastructure threaten India's maritime domain awareness.
4. **Piracy and Maritime Crimes:** Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia remain piracy hotspots; also rising cases of drug and arms trafficking.
5. **Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing:** China's fishing fleet contributes to depletion of marine resources and coastal community distress.
6. **Climate Change Impact:** Indian Ocean is warming faster than the Pacific; sea-level rise and extreme weather endanger coastal zones.
7. **Geopolitical Volatility:** Instability in West Asia, potential US retrenchment, and overlapping strategic interests fuel uncertainty.

Way Forward

- **Develop Island Infrastructure** in Andaman, Nicobar, and Lakshadweep for strategic reach.
- **Enhance Naval Capabilities** with surveillance systems, submarines, and aircraft.
- **Deepen Multilateral Engagements** via IORA, IONS, QUAD, and Colombo Security Conclave.
- **Counter China's Influence** by expanding India's diplomatic, financial, and technical outreach in the IOR.
- **Strengthen Blue Economy** projects like Sagarmala and Project Mausam for sustainable growth.
- **Advance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** through IFC-IOR, AI-based surveillance, and joint exercises.
- **Invest in Climate Resilience** and HADR preparedness for regional stability and goodwill.

To secure its long-term strategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region, India must adopt a multi-dimensional approach that blends hard power, regional cooperation, and sustainable development. Government initiatives like **SAGAR**, **Sagarmala**, **Project Mausam**, and the recently launched **MAHASAGAR Initiative** reflect India's vision of inclusive maritime diplomacy, regional resilience, and rule-based maritime governance. By deepening its engagement with littoral states and promoting alternatives to hegemonic influence, India can reinforce its position as a leading and responsible maritime power in the Indo-Pacific.