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India Foundation Journal

Editorial Board

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About India Foundation

India Foundation is an independent research centre focussed on the issues, challenges, and opportunities of the Indian polity. The Foundation believes in understanding contemporary India and its global context through the civilizational lens of a society on the forward move. Based on the principles of independence, objectivity and academic rigour, the Foundation aims at increasing awareness and advocating its views on issues of both national and international importance.

With a team of dedicated professionals based at its office in New Delhi, the Foundation works with partners and associates both in India and overseas to further its stated objectives.

About India Foundation Journal

The India Foundation Journal is led by an Editorial Board of eminent scholars and leaders from various spheres of Indian public life. The bi-monthly journal covers a wide range of issues pertinent to the national interest, mainly focusing on international relations, national security, legal and constitutional issues and other issues of social, religious and political significance. The journal seeks articles from scholars with the intent of creating a significant body of knowledge with a nationalist perspective and establish a recognised forum for debates involving academicians and policymakers.

The 2026 Gulf War and the Fragility of Global Maritime Security

Dhruv C Katoch*

The regional war in the Persian Gulf involving Iran, Israel, and the US, which began on 28 February 2026, has caused extensive damage across Iran and to US assets in the Gulf. US military bases have been struck in almost all the Gulf countries, including Iraq, Jordan, and Türkiye. Israel has also been subjected to multiple missile and drone attacks from Iran and by Hezbollah in Lebanon.

A two-week ceasefire was announced on 8 April 2026, after which high-level talks were held between US and Iranian officials in Islamabad. The talks did not yield an outcome, but the US has now extended the truce indefinitely to allow ongoing peace negotiations. Future talks may or may not yield an outcome, but in the meantime, Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz. To reopen it, the US has imposed a blockade around the Strait to prevent ships from entering or leaving Iranian ports. As approximately 80% of Iran's oil exports and nearly 70% of its total non-oil trade pass through the Strait of Hormuz, the blockade will significantly disrupt the Iranian economy. The US hopes to break Iran's stranglehold on the Strait through economic pressure.

At present, there appears to be no early end to the conflict. The blockade at a single chokepoint is already causing ripple effects across the world's major economies. The price of Brent crude oil, which had been hovering between $65 and $70 per barrel before the war, has spiked to over $100 per barrel and could reach $150 if the war is not resolved early. Currently, India, China, South Korea, Japan, and many other countries that rely on energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz are affected. Even nations not directly affected have seen energy prices rise. This underscores the importance of maritime security across the global commons and at all chokepoints.

The security environment must be viewed in the context of India's ambitious goal to become a developed nation by 2047. The stated goal is for India's GDP to reach USD 30-35 trillion by then, up from USD 4.2 trillion today. In real terms, this means India must maintain an annual growth rate of about 10% over the next twenty years to reach this goal. Sustaining such growth depends on further developing India's maritime economy. Today, nearly 95% of India's trade by volume and around 70% by value passes through maritime routes, emphasising the sector's significance to India's economy and competitiveness. India's interests, hence, lie in a free and open Indian Ocean. That is why Maritime India Vision 2030 identifies 10 pivotal themes to position India as a global maritime powerhouse.

The Maritime India Vision document emphasises the development of port infrastructure,

*Maj. Gen. Dhruv C. Katoch is Editor, India Foundation Journal and Director, India Foundation.

efficient logistics networks, shipbuilding and repair, and the strengthening of policy and institutional frameworks to support all stakeholders as key initiatives for achieving this goal.[1] More importantly, a safe and secure maritime environment is essential to achieving that target.

Freedom of navigation is crucial for maritime trade, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region. Its strategic importance stems from the fact that major Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) pass through this area, which includes four critical chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Lombok Strait. Disruption at any of these locations can significantly affect global energy supplies and supply chains, as demonstrated by the current closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

Today, the Indian Ocean plays a central role in global commerce. Around 100,000 ships pass through this ocean annually, carrying a third of the world's containerised cargo. The IOR also accounts for about 20 per cent of the world's refining capacity, mainly in the Gulf region (notably Jubail in Saudi Arabia, Jamnagar in Gujarat, and Singapore). Furthermore, the ocean supports offshore oil and gas exploration and production activities along the coasts of India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, other GCC countries, and Western Australia, representing 40 per cent of global offshore output.[2] In terms of energy resources, 42 per cent of global crude oil, products, and distillates move through the Indian Ocean. The IOR contains about 50 per cent of global oil reserves[3] and about 44 per cent of global gas reserves.[4] It is hence vital to secure the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and choke points to ensure the unhindered flow of maritime traffic.

Maritime threats to free and open navigation in the Indian Ocean arise from state conflict, piracy, terrorism, and illegal trafficking. The US-Israeli conflict with Iran has led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, resulting in about 10% of the world's container traffic being rerouted. Even the Red Sea route faces pressure, with many carriers choosing the more expensive route around the Cape of Good Hope. Besides rising costs, there are serious challenges to the predictability of energy supplies, which could potentially have a disastrous impact on global economies. India would be particularly affected.

But there is yet another danger to maritime shipping. Wars are also fought in the electromagnetic spectrum, and that has impacted shipping in and around the war zone. A cursory glance at a map showing the location of commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz shows different clusters of ships, some even over the land! This is because, as numerous ballistic missiles are fired by the belligerents, countermeasures such as GPS jamming are employed to interfere with missile guidance systems. This has adversely impacted the AIS (Automatic Identification System) signals for civilian ships, significantly increasing the risk of collisions. Ships use AIS to identify each other and also to avoid collisions. Tankers carrying hundreds of thousands of tonnes of oil cannot come to a sudden halt or turn quickly to avoid a collision. They take time to adjust their course, significantly increasing the risk of collisions among merchant ships operating in war zones.[5]

After years of decline, piracy saw a marked resurgence in 2025, which has continued to this day. Piracy imposes high costs on the global economy, estimated at between $7 billion and $12 billion in annual losses.[6] Thanks to coordinated efforts by the governments of the rim countries, piracy concerns have been significantly reduced in Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa, although they still occasionally resurface. Piracy activities typically involve hijacking tugboats and barges, as well as kidnapping crews for ransom. In response, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was established in 2006, with an Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore. This was the first regional government-to-government agreement aimed at fostering cooperation to combat maritime security threats in Asia. Later, in 2017, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines established the Trilateral Maritime Patrols to coordinate responses to kidnappings and robberies in the Sulu and Celebes Seas.

These initiatives have proven to be effective, and today most piracy incidents are limited to petty theft. Similarly, to tackle piracy concerns in the Horn of Africa, nineteen countries formed the Djibouti Code of Conduct—a cooperation agreement against piracy and armed robbery at sea—in 2008. In 2022, the International Maritime Organisation removed the Indian Ocean's status as a high-risk area for piracy. Although piracy has decreased, the UN-led military response remains active today, and countries such as India and China have deployed troops to support the effort.[7]

In March 2024, Indian naval commandos successfully rescued all 17 crew members of the Maltese-flagged bulk cargo vessel MV Ruen after a 40-hour operation, 2600 km from Indian shores. The operation, which lasted 40 hours, was led by INS Kolkata and supported by INS Subhadra, High Altitude Long Endurance drones, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, and naval commandos. All 35 pirates were taken into custody.[8] This action was significant in suppressing piracy in the Western Indian Ocean, but since then, suspected Somali pirate groups have shown the ability to operate far offshore using hijacked fishing vessels as motherships.

On 6 November 2025, pirates hijacked the *Hellas Aphrodite*, but the ship was rescued the following day by a Spanish warship, ESPS Victoria, under the European Union's counter-piracy mission, 'Operation Atalanta'. Central Somali communities are frustrated over perceived illegal fishing by foreign ships, which strips the Somali government of revenue and erodes the livelihoods of artisanal fishers. Pirate groups often claim they are 'protecting' their waters and making a living in an environment with limited fishing opportunities. Piracy concerns, therefore, become entangled with illegal fishing issues. There is also a growing relationship between al-Shabaab and Houthis, which adds to maritime insecurity.[9] An interesting aspect of the *Hellas Aphrodite* attack was that the crew prevented a hijacking by taking shelter in the 'citadel'. This is a secure location within a ship, self-contained with food, water, medical supplies, sanitation, and communication, designed to accommodate the entire crew and additional

personnel for three to five days. This provides friendly naval forces with the time they need to arrive and carry out a rescue operation. Such best practises need to be followed by all merchant ships.

Beyond state conflict and piracy, the IOR faces challenges related to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, narcotics smuggling, and underwater security. IUU is a major concern. The plundering of regional stocks by large, well-equipped trawlers disrupts local economies and also serves as a front for human and drug trafficking.

Trafficking in drugs remains a major concern. The IOR is located between two regions known for drug trafficking—the Golden Crescent (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) to its west and the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand) to its east. This positioning makes the IOR a key hotspot for drug smuggling. Owing to the vast, largely unmonitored ocean, substantial quantities can be transported via small boats or dhows. These vessels can be transhipped at sea, making detection difficult. Nonetheless, in a remarkable operation, INS Tarkash, a frontline frigate of the Indian Navy, successfully intercepted and seized over 2500 kg of narcotics in the Western Indian Ocean on 31 March 2025.[10] However, such maritime drug routes continue to expand, prompting new initiatives like India's IOS (Indian Ocean Ship) SAGAR 2.0. This unique operational engagement programme enables naval personnel from friendly foreign countries to train and sail together on board an Indian naval ship.

The deployment of advanced submarine technology and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) by major powers has elevated Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) to a top priority for regional navies. This also presents a threat to underwater cables in the IOR. The Houthis in Yemen have repeatedly threatened to cut or damage undersea cables in the Red Sea. Their persistent attacks on shipping have already made the Red Sea a high-risk area for vessels. The internet outage across West and South Asia in September 2025 was caused by the cutting of undersea cables in the Red Sea. Although this was later found to be due to accidental damage during commercial shipping, the challenge of safeguarding undersea cables remains.[11]

India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision document, announced by Prime Minister Modi on 12 March 2015, remains a strategic framework for securing the Indian Ocean as a free, open, peaceful, and navigable region. India has since emerged as a net security provider in the region, maintaining open sea lanes free from piracy and serving as a primary responder in most HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) missions. India's new MAHASAGAR (Maritime Heads for Active Security And Growth for All in the Region) initiative is an extension of SAGAR, shifting the focus from maritime security alone to economic and geopolitical concerns. But the immediate challenge India and the world face is to bring the ongoing Gulf war to a swift conclusion. That has to be the first step towards ensuring the safety and security of the Indian Ocean.

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Curtain Raiser Address

Ram Madhav*

It gives me immense pleasure to invite you to the 9th edition of the Indian Ocean Conference here in Mauritius. This conference is taking place under extraordinary circumstances. There is an ongoing conflict, with an uncertain diplomatic pause, in our neighbourhood at this moment.

The conflict is limited to just three countries, but its consequences are being felt by almost all countries in the world. The economy, trade and travel have been severely affected in our region and beyond. There are many important lessons that the current situation teaches us.

- One, no conflicts are local. All conflicts will have regional and global consequences.
- Two, we have entered the age of middle powers and multipolarity, rather than unipolar or bipolar superpower geopolitics.
- Third, and most importantly, all future geopolitics will be regional.

We, the nations assembled here, belong to the Indian Ocean Region. It is the most dynamic region in the world today. The Indian Ocean Region has emerged in this century as the global power axis. 40 per cent of global bulk container traffic and 70 per cent of the world's energy trade pass through this region. This region is home to 3 of the world's top 5 economies. Incidentally, 3 of the 5 largest militaries are also based here.

We long prided ourselves on the peace and freedom that prevailed in our region. But sadly, today we realise that this tranquil region is turning into a volatile one. Where there is volatility, there is always room for big-power intervention and politics. There is a need to be aware of that danger.

The Indian Ocean Conference is a platform intended to catalyse regional cooperation for the peaceful management of the region. Through a series of annual foreign ministers' conferences among the regional countries, we intend to strengthen the idea that the region's present and future – political, economic, environmental, and security – must be managed primarily by the countries here, with support from the powers beyond where necessary. The big question is: Are we ready to shoulder the responsibility for building a peaceful, free and prosperous Indian Ocean?

Friends! We are extremely grateful to H.E. Navin Ramgoolam, the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Mauritius, and his able colleagues for hosting this conference in such a fabulous manner. The Hon'ble PM is an elder statesman and one of the most respected in the region, and his leadership is important for regional peace and stability.

H.E. Dr Jaishankar, India's EAM, is a household name in the strategic and diplomatic world. He has been integral to this vision and initiative. We are ever grateful to him for his leadership and support.

H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidi, the foreign minister of Oman, who is playing a critical role at the moment in securing peace in West Asia and the Middle East, has also been integral to this initiative. His in-person presence is missed due to the understandable regional situation. But he is

*Dr. Ram Madhav is the President of India Foundation.

joining us virtually from Oman. We are thankful for his interest and involvement.

H.E. Vivian Balakrishnan, FM of Singapore, has also been an important leader of the initiative right from its first conference in 2016, which he hosted in Singapore. We miss him this year, but we are grateful for his support.

Last but not least, we wish to express our heartfelt appreciation to H.E. Dhananjay Ramful, the Foreign Minister of Mauritius, for the graceful conduct of the conference and for leading from the front.

Over the next two days, ministers and other senior leaders from more than 25 countries will address this conference, which is attended by more than 200 delegates from 33 countries. I welcome each of you to this most important calendar event of the year in our region. We are aware of the difficulties some of you faced in arranging travel and logistics. Some could not attend due to the prevailing situation in the region. We thank each of you for joining us at this conference despite these difficulties.

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Special Address

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi*

As we set sail towards new horizons of maritime partnership, this year the war against Iran has prevented me from attending the conference in person. Since the deplorable initiation of this war on February the 28th, violence in the region has escalated. This has had a strong impact on our seas, through the disruption of transit through the Strait of Hormuz, the targeting of port infrastructure, and events such as the torpedo attack on an Iranian ship as it returned from a cooperative maritime event, the International Fleet Review in India. In the face of such instability, Oman believes that collective stewardship of our ocean offers the most promising route to peace and harmony. We hope that the ceasefire, which came into effect on Wednesday, will help to restore security, stability, and maritime freedom in the region.

Oman reiterates its commitment to working closely with its partners to uphold the law of the sea, promote constructive cooperation, and protect our ocean and the people on its shores. We must prevent the Indian Ocean from becoming a source of conflict, hostility, or zero-sum competition. For centuries, the Indian Ocean has connected our cultures, economies, and communities. Today, it carries a significant share of global trade and serves as a key channel for cooperation. Looking ahead, the Indian Ocean offers an opportunity to secure a sustainable future and elevate the prosperity of billions. We must continue to act together as stewards of this vision.

Collective stewardship requires us to reaffirm our adherence to international law, including freedom of navigation and state sovereignty, amid the growing fragmentation of the global order. Crucially, we must speak out in favour of justice when these laws are violated. Our approach must be guided by pragmatism, neutrality, and mutual respect. And it must have the future of our planet at its heart. In times of heightened violence, we often overlook the environmental impact on our oceans, including harmful contamination, explosives, and rising temperatures. This is yet another reminder that it is in our collective interest to denounce conflict.

We must also balance the potential of the blue economy with the preservation of our natural environment. The responsible use of marine resources is vital. We must engage with all stakeholders, listen openly to new ideas, and thereby map the most strategic path to sustainable development. The Indian Ocean has connected us for millennia, and it will continue to do so for many years to come. The Sovereign of Oman is grateful that, even in times of severe uncertainty, our partnership and our collective stewardship of the Indian Ocean endure. Thank you very much.

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H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi is the Foreign Minister of Oman.

Keynote Address

S. Jaishankar*

It's a privilege to share my thoughts at the 9th Indian Ocean Conference on collective stewardship for the Indian Ocean. Let me express my appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Mauritius, specifically to Prime Minister Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam and to Foreign Minister Mr Dhananjay Ramful, to the organisers, India Foundation, and to Ram Madhav ji, who has been the driving force behind this conference for all these years.

We gather every year, at least we have for the last nine, to deliberate on the Indian Ocean, its achievements, prospects and challenges. And we do so again at a time when the turbulence in the world and in the Indian Ocean itself is at a high. This gives our conversations a particular value, and I am confident that you all share that belief. In this background, let me make five points that I hope you will reflect on during the Conference deliberations:

- The first is an obvious one; I am stating the obvious, but it is nevertheless necessary today. And it is about the importance of the Ocean. This is not just a framework in which we all exist, but an ecosystem; it is the resources on which we depend, the connectivity on which we thrive, and indeed the culture we have built over the ages. It is so fundamental that when this is disrupted, numerous aspects of life are impacted. We are seeing it today. The Indian Ocean must plan for more stormy days while hoping for more sunny ones.
- Over the last few decades, our focus has been on overcoming the artificial barriers of the colonial era. This meant deeper regional cooperation, stronger economic linkages, the rebuilding of connectivity, and the revival of traditions. Last year, we deliberated at some length on these very facets. The spirit of the monsoons must inspire us to keep working together. We must continue to advance this and not be distracted from our long-term goals. The world may be more fragmented, but we, the nations of the Indian Ocean, must seek to be more cohesive.
- Global trends are a reality that cannot be ignored. The world is more competitive, fractured and inward-looking than in the past. The benefits of globalisation are today overshadowed by the temptations to leverage and weaponise. As a result, we are all in a quest for greater resilience and are seeking more trusted partners.
- Chokepoints are now a great global anxiety. We naturally tend to think of them physically, as is the case in nearby regions. But let's not forget that they have also been conceptualised in domains such as finance, chnology, resources and even knowledge. Overcoming that control mindset is essential for the well-being of the international economy.
- And not least, there is a call for deeper cooperation amongst the nations of the Indian Ocean. In many ways, it is a Global South

*Dr S. Jaishankar is the External Affairs Minister, Government of India.

Ocean. Whether it is food, fuel or fertiliser shortages, responding to natural disasters, or addressing the consequences of conflicts, the answer increasingly lies in collective resilience. We in India have articulated it through our MAHASAGAR outlook and our Neighbourhood First policy.

With those five points before you, let me emphasise today that we meet in a world marked by uncertainty and rapid change. The global order is undergoing a period of profound transition, shaped by shifting power balances, ongoing conflicts, economic fragmentation, and growing contestation. Nations increasingly prioritise security and resilience. Here is the paradox the world faces: interdependence is deepening, yet competition is intensifying. Navigating this is therefore becoming tougher.

In these turbulent times, the situation in West Asia merits particular attention. All of us are deeply concerned about the conflict and would like to see an early return to normalcy. We firmly oppose the targeting of civilians, infrastructure and commercial shipping. It is essential that navigation remains safe and unimpeded. Each of us has felt the economic impact of this conflict very deeply. When energy is scarce and expensive, it has far-reaching implications for society as a whole. When trade is constricted, the effects go beyond business to livelihoods across sectors. When fertilisers are harder to procure, the consequences for food security are obvious. These are the immediate challenges as we meet here at this conference. But there are underlying issues that we also need to address, because there is no guarantee that such scenarios will not recur.

So let me turn back to the Indian Ocean that we collectively inhabit. The Ocean's vulnerability only further highlights its centrality. We have to recognise that the pressures on the Indian Ocean are only growing. The takeaway here is the urgency with which we seek solutions, and the importance of convincing the international community of that pressing requirement. It can no longer be business as usual.

We have been discussing non-traditional challenges in our maritime space at multiple conferences. But here is the truth we cannot avoid. There is a full-blown conflict that is today deeply affecting all nations of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, there are grey zone activities that span the spectrum between the traditional and the non-traditional. We all saw and felt the consequences when shipping in the Red Sea was disrupted over the last few years. So, the bottom line is that the spectrum of challenges has become wider and more seamless, and, unfortunately, more serious. Our stewardship cannot ignore this.

No single Indian Ocean state, however capable, can alone preserve and protect the maritime space. The complex challenges demand a shared commitment. One rooted in cooperation, transparency, and, above all, respect for international law. We must view the Indian Ocean as a global commons, where not only the benefits are shared but so too other responsibilities. Our efforts must be pursued through strong institutional networks. The Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) enables real-time maritime information sharing, enhancing domain awareness and operational coordination among partner countries. Regional platforms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indo-

Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), BIMSTEC, Colombo Security Conclave, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) all provide structured avenues for dialogue, cooperation, and capacity building.

India has consistently acted as a 'First Responder' in the Indian Ocean region. Whether in humanitarian crises or natural disasters, we have stepped forward with speed and reliability. Be it disaster relief operations in Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Mozambique or responding to oil spills off the coasts of Mauritius or Sri Lanka, we have been there for the region. A recent example is 'Operation Sagarbandhu' in Sri Lanka after the devastating Cyclone Ditwah last year. We not only undertook prompt and extensive HADR operations, but also committed a package worth USD 450 million for relief and reconstruction.

Equally important is our approach to development partnerships. India's engagement is guided by the priorities of our partners, focused on sustainable outcomes. Let me cite some examples.

- Here in Mauritius, in addition to iconic projects like the Metro Express, we are currently working on water supply, a police academy, a forensic laboratory and archives. Just earlier today, I had the honour of joining Prime Minister Ramgoolam to dedicate a Renal Transplant Unit and hand over 90 e-buses. The recent Special Economic Package, which we have finalised, contemplates 8 significant initiatives in health, transport and infrastructure.
- In Seychelles, while partnering over the years in different domains, we have again just extended a Special Economic Package, the delivery of which Foreign Minister Barry Faure and I are working on.
- In Sri Lanka, our projects span housing, health, education, cultural centres, connectivity infrastructure and livelihood enhancement.
- In the Maldives, major ongoing projects include the flagship Greater Male Connectivity Project, several road and water sanitation projects, and airport development.
- In Madagascar, India's assistance in agriculture and energy is today underscored by the supply of rice in very large quantities.
- Where partners such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan in South Asia are concerned, or Tanzania and Mozambique in Africa, our development partnerships are subjects in themselves. They encompass so many dimensions of the economy and society. And these projects have not just been transformational in themselves but have actually brought our countries and our region much closer.

Apart from this, capacity building and capability enhancement for our partners in the region are equally vital. Many countries in the region face difficulties in monitoring their vast EEZs. To support our partners, we have not only invested in dedicated training programmes but are also equipping their navies and coast guard. I also note that in Sri Lanka, we have recently set up and operationalised the Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centre. As we discuss collective stewardship, defence partnerships also come to mind. And ours in this region are rooted in cooperation, not in confrontation. Through joint exercises, whether AIKEYME, Dosti, or MILAN,

we build interoperability and trust to combat threats collectively and create a safer, more prosperous Indian Ocean region.

All these efforts become meaningless without connectivity. Indeed, connectivity ties everything together. Whether it is the IMEC, the INSTC, or the IMTT, India is at the centre of these initiatives. Our approach to connectivity is clear. It must be transparent, consultative, respectful of sovereignty, and a genuine partnership.

Allow me also to share a thought on the Indian Ocean Rim Association, headquartered here in Mauritius. As the current Chair, India is committed to deepening sustainable development, capacity building and regional integration.

Among the platforms relevant to the Indian Ocean is also the Quad. India's partners in the Quad – Australia, Japan and the United States – are all maritime nations. Our first collaboration actually started in the Indian Ocean in 2004. So let me just flag to your attention some of the Quad initiatives of relevance, including the Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, the Indo-Pacific Logistics Network, and the Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience.

In this volatile era, the idea of collective stewardship calls for moving beyond narrow calculations and embracing the broader vision of shared responsibility. The Indian Ocean, with all its promise and challenges, offers us an opportunity to demonstrate what such cooperation can achieve. By working together, we can ensure a free, stable and prosperous Indian Ocean region. India remains fully committed to this endeavour.

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Chief Guest Address

Navinchandra Ramgoolam*

Your Excellencies, Heads of Delegations, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, and Distinguished Guests. I extend a warm welcome to all of you to the 9th Indian Ocean Conference. As you know, this conference is organised by the India Foundation in partnership with the Government of Mauritius. It gives me great pleasure to host this important initiative.

Thank you to the Indian Foundation and its president, Dr Ram Madhav, for their support in organising this conference. The theme of the 9th Indian Ocean Conference could not be more topical or relevant: "Collective Stewardship for Indian Ocean Governance". Over the next two days, regional leaders, officials, and distinguished experts will discuss matters of vital importance to all their countries and, indeed, to the whole world.

We are navigating a world in turmoil. A confluence of geopolitical upheavals, threats to peace and stability, rapid technological transformation, climate change, and the erosion of diversity has posed grave challenges for humanity—challenges no previous generation has had to confront. The question is, how do we rise to meet them? Your presence in Mauritius today, despite the prevailing circumstances, is not mere symbolism; it is a concrete demonstration that, despite these uncertainties, we can still put dialogue before confrontation and collaboration before conflict.

Whilst we welcome the two-week ceasefire reached a couple of days ago, it remains fragile. We must not be lulled into complacency. We should all work together towards a peaceful and permanent resolution of the crisis. We strongly believe that this can be achieved only through dialogue and diplomatic efforts. We are all aware, as so many international experts and observers say, that the war's impact will be long-lasting, with devastating effects on our economies. Even now, we're feeling its impact.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I acknowledge in our midst the presence of Dr Jaishankar, the distinguished Minister of External Affairs from the Republic of India.

The 8th Indian Ocean conference, under the theme "Voyage to New Horizons of Maritime Partnerships", was hosted by the Sultanate of Oman. His Excellency Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, the Foreign Minister of the Sultanate of Oman, was unable to attend because of the war, but we heard him, and we welcome the inspiring address that we just delivered.

And I salute the presence of leaders and high officials from across the African continent, a continent whose mighty strength is increasingly felt throughout the world. If we join together, united in a common endeavour to promote the goals of peaceful coexistence, dialogue and cooperation in these maritime and other spheres, we will be a powerful force for the good of the world in a troubled world. This would not have been possible without India's presidency of the G20 from 2022 to 2023 and the commitment of Prime Minister

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Narendra Modi to advance the cause of the African continent. During India's presidency, the African Union was admitted as a permanent member of the G20, and we thank Prime Minister Narendra Modi for this initiative.

One of the most influential naval strategists in history, the American Alfred Mahan, emphasised the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, predicting its central role in future world geopolitics. His words proved prophetic, as he wrote, "whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century. The destiny of the world will be decided on its waters". The extraordinary thing is that these words were written in the 19th century.

More recently, in 2010, Robert Kaplan, well known for his work on politics and foreign affairs, identified the Indian Ocean and the surrounding region as the new pivot of world politics. The region connects energy producers, manufacturing centres, and major markets across continents. Its sea lanes carry a substantial share of global trade, and its choke points are critical to the functioning of the global economy. But it is now much more than that. It is becoming a strategic system in its own right. In an era of renewed great power rivalry, such geography inevitably attracts strategic attention. For the region's states, this critical juncture presents both opportunities and risks. We cannot allow the future shape of our maritime region to be determined solely by others.

And that must be combined with the way to which I have alluded. The risk is that individual voices will be drowned out in the strident roar of the biggest beasts. The central challenge lies in ensuring that the Indian Ocean remains an area of cooperation rather than of confrontation. But this requires a shift in approach and perspective, moving away from geographical relevance to strategic relevance, from individual positioning to regional awareness, and from passive adaptation to a policy of shaping the future of the region in which we all dwell.

Conflicts propagate through interconnected systems, affecting many non-belligerents. The situation in the Middle East illustrates what I am saying. How many countries in the Gulf area are today concerned spectators and collateral victims of the war in the region? Modern conflict is no longer conducted solely through military means; it is also shaped by narratives, framing events, justifying actions, and managing perception.

In such an environment, uncertainty itself can become an instrument of strategy. Conflicting claims, shifting justifications and inconsistent messages create a fog in which decisions are taken. The risk is not only misjudgement but also miscalculation. You have been told that we cannot plan the future based on yesterday's assumptions, yet we have reached a stage where we doubt whether you can chart a future course of action based on today's assumptions.

History reminds us that conflicts can expand not only through deliberate design but also through misinterpretation of intent and overreaction to perceived threat. The contemporary environment is an element of that pattern. For small states in particular, our task is to navigate this landscape with discernment, resisting the pull of competing narratives while remaining anchored in principles and clarity. Within this broader context, Mauritius

occupies a position that carries both opportunity and responsibility.

Situated at the crossroads of maritime routes and maintaining constructive relations across regions, Mauritius is well placed to play an important role in dialogue and cooperation within the Indian Ocean. This role doesn't require the muscular assertion of exorbitant rights; it requires facilitation, encouraging consultation among states facing similar vulnerabilities, promoting adherence to international norms and the rule of law, and supporting initiatives that reinforce stability and cooperation.

We shall not cease to be the quiet voice of reason, the still, small voice that constantly reminds the world that another, better path is open to us, to which we shall inevitably be driven once the turbulent fever of this time abates and the goals of international peace are once again restored to their rightful place as the best flights of humanity. In a region of growing strategic importance, even modest contributions to collective understanding can have a meaningful impact.

We are facing harsh realities today, driven by structural changes in economic trade and geopolitical architecture. But these are the realities of our times; we can no more avoid them than our forebears could avoid theirs. And we must take the same time to prepare for the future.

The future of the Indian Ocean would seem more uncertain today than it did a decade ago. And I've said that the times demand sustained and coordinated engagement among the states of the Indian Ocean, between those states and their partners, whether state or institution, within and beyond the borders of our region. That coordination must include the small island developing states and address issues relevant to us, such as climate change, maritime domain awareness, economic integration, capacity building and sustainable development. The states of the Indian Ocean and the partners have already taken measures to coordinate their actions.

The focus of the Portuguese declaration of 1982 is on regional solidarity in the western Indian Ocean through cooperation on projects such as ecosystem preservation, sustainable management of natural resources, maritime security, and sectors related to sustainable development.

Alongside the Indian Ocean Commission (Commission de l'Océan Indien - COI), Mauritius has also hosted the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since its establishment in 1997. The IORA complements the COI's regional dimension by bringing together both the island States and the littoral States of the Indian Ocean. Through the IORA, member States embrace the entire Indian Ocean. Having the world's powers as dialogue partners gives the Association an additional layer of influence. Our dialogue partners add another dimension to collective stewardship for Indian Ocean governance. While stewardship and governance of the Indian Ocean are the responsibility of the Indian Ocean states, there is awareness far beyond the region, as those far-sighted have noted, foreshadowing that the Indian Ocean will be crucial to the future of the world.

The ocean is vast. Monitoring and securing the maritime domain pose a challenge, as His Excellency, the Minister of External Affairs of India, rightly pointed out. Yet we must do so if we are to ensure that the Indian Ocean remains open to free passage, which is essential to global trade.

Its position and importance demand, as well as contribute to, the health of the world's oceans. This is for the good of the states, both in the Indian Ocean and beyond it.

I'm deeply grateful that India contributes so significantly to our regional cooperation frameworks. Through the Information Fusion Centre in Gurugram, India participates with partner nations, including Mauritius, in enhancing maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean and adjoining seas.

India is also the current chair of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which works towards enhancing maritime cooperation among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, including Mauritius. It is also the anchor of the Colombo security conclave, which includes Mauritius. This is an important platform for security cooperation among Indian Ocean states. These maritime assets are complemented by aerial elements, including aircraft and helicopters, to cover a range of operations.

During the state visit to Mauritius in March of last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled India's expanded maritime vision, "MAHASAGAR" (Mutual Area for Holistic Advancement of Security for Growth across Regions), to the world.

MAHASAGAR builds on the previous SAGAR vision, announced again in Mauritius in 2015. It is an overarching framework that goes beyond a solely maritime security perspective to include the realms of economy, technology and environmental sustainability. All of which concerns are of immediate relevance to the Indian Ocean States and the littoral states.

MAHASAGAR was born of the philosophy of the oneness of all oceans, forming, in effect, one great ocean. Mauritius strongly supports this vision. But alongside this philosophy, there is a hard-edged reality and urgency to our immediate needs. So I'll ask again: what is the way forward?

The way forward is to:

- First, in collective solidarity to advance peace, maritime stability and security in the Indian Ocean, guided by the three themes of freedom of navigation, maritime law and governance, and maritime security. This Indian Ocean conference offers a sure platform to make progress on these matters. Freedom of navigation is the cornerstone of international law. Maritime law and governance regulate activities on the oceans, including shipping, navigation and commerce. Maritime security primarily protects ships, boats and critical sea lanes from piracy, terrorism and environmental disasters, and has become an essential part of foreign policy. Each is a strand that weaves into our immediate reality. Altogether, they form the geopolitical tapestry in which we are embedded.
- Second, we already contribute actively to regional cooperation frameworks and to bilateral engagement towards the governance of the Indian Ocean. We can do more and we should do more, collectively, for the interests of the Indian Ocean that unites all of us.
- Third, these reflections converge on a common conclusion. The future stability of the Indian Ocean and indeed of the wider

international environment cannot be left solely to the interests and ephemeral priorities of power blocs and superpowers. It will also depend on whether the states that inhabit those shores recognise their shared interests and act with the confidence that comes from cooperation and strategic clarity.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, unity and solidarity are not vain words; they are the imperatives in times of crisis and in the changing world. The ability to think and act together will prove to be the most enduring safeguard of all. Alone, we can do so little, but together we can do so much. Let us not allow the tidal currents of world-shaking events, now upending long-held competencies and assumptions, to go to waste. These lines from William Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar capture the risks and opportunities I've spoken about.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

With these words, I wish you productive and fruitful deliberations during this conference's sessions.

Thank you.

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Collective Stewardship and Shared Destiny: Mauritius's Vision for the Indian Ocean

Dhananjay Ramful*

Allow me at the outset to highlight that we have nine African countries bordering the Indian Ocean, and I take pride in being the first African state to host this annual event, which aspires to become a perennial feature of the diplomatic agenda of the Indian Ocean region.

This year's theme for the Indian Ocean conference, "Collective Stewardship for Indian Ocean Governance," is highly relevant given the current geopolitical context. Little did we know that when the theme was adopted, the Indian Ocean region and beyond would be affected by the conflict in the Middle East. For over six weeks, the world has experienced major disruptions to the global economy, and some economists are warning that the worst energy crisis in history is on the horizon. The recently concluded ceasefire offers a glimmer of hope. The ceasefire is fragile; the US-Iran talks could end the war or escalate it, but it holds the desperate hope of a possible way forward towards the eventual end of hostilities. The current situation compels us to reflect and reassess our priorities, and to reorient our collective efforts towards effective governance of the Indian Ocean for the interests of the region and beyond.

As far as Mauritius is concerned, the foundation of our foreign policy is to realise a prosperous and sustainable economy. Mauritius is a small island developing state, fully integrated into a globalised and equitable world. Globalisation and equity have never been more relevant, especially for us, the states of the Indian Ocean, and their partners beyond. The national anthem of Mauritius sings of the population of the country gathered as one people, one nation, in peace, justice, and liberty.

We in Mauritius are diverse, hailing from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Our ancestors were forcibly brought to Mauritius; others came by choice. The population of Mauritius has many histories. Diversity is a wealth; it is also a challenge. It calls for the contributions and efforts of all to work towards a common goal and forge a common destiny, especially as we seek to build the bridge to the future. That is the objective of the government of the day. We might not always have common positions, but we all have a common interest in addressing our immediate priorities and building the future we want for our children and the generations to come. The story of Mauritius is thus that of the states of the Indian Ocean and the stakeholders beyond the Indian Ocean. Our governments might not have common positions, but the Indian Ocean is our common interest.

When this government was elected in November 2024, it pledged in its programme to explore all opportunities arising from bilateral and multilateral cooperation to address, among other priorities, the development of the ocean economy, the promotion of regional cooperation, and the enhancement of economic integration, particularly

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with the coastal states of the Indian Ocean. It also pledged to enhance cooperation with the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and to press for more equitable arrangements for the allocation of marine resources in the Indian Ocean. This is in line with our desire to see ourselves no longer as a small island state, but to position ourselves as a large ocean state. This obviously calls for a change in mindset; it also calls for cooperation and synergy with and beyond the Indian Ocean states.

Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity has always been and remains a constant in our foreign policy. It is a principle we uphold with conviction and defend consistently. Today, the recognition of our sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, as enshrined in our constitution, is a reality acknowledged across the international arena. This is a matter of justice; it is also a reaffirmation of an outcome after more than 50 years of struggle, grounded in international law. I wish to take this opportunity to thank all of you present today for your continuous support in this long struggle for unfinished post-colonial business. We will spare no effort to pursue any diplomatic or legal avenue to complete the decolonisation process in this part of the Indian Ocean.

Yet, for Mauritius, sovereignty has never meant isolation; it has never excluded cooperation. On the contrary, it has guided us towards constructive partnership. While today some dispute the right of passage through international straits, back in 2012 Mauritius and the Republic of Seychelles chose a path of collaboration. We concluded treaties to exercise joint sovereign rights and joint management of the continental shelf in the Mascarene Plateau region. This was a deliberate choice, to avoid lengthy and unnecessary maritime disputes and to act in the shared interest of our peoples. The Mauritius-Seychelles Joint Management Area was a first in history. It is a pioneering model. It is widely regarded as a textbook case of maritime cooperation, delivering tangible benefits to both parties and creating opportunities for others to engage alongside us. Our experience in establishing the Joint Management Area shows that cooperation is possible, that sovereignty and collaboration can go hand in hand, and that together we can build a framework for the collective stewardship of the Indian Ocean.

This is the spirit that must guide us in the Indian Ocean: partnership, pragmatism, and shared responsibility. In line with the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, Mauritius has remained steadfast in its commitment to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. These principles are not abstract; they are essential to stability and fundamental to trust. We do not seek to influence the internal affairs of others; that is not our role. But we are ready to share our experience and to contribute. This is our vision, and this is our commitment.

Effective governance requires a rules-based order to which all parties agree to abide. This ensures coherence, coordination, and organisation for the good of all. On that score, we are fortunate to have the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets the legal framework for all ocean space, including the Indian Ocean. UNCLOS thus provides all Indian Ocean states and beyond with the legal parameters for

marine activities and resource management, and defines maritime zones and jurisdictions, amongst others. UNCLOS is therefore a grand maritime architecture.

More recently, the UN agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, the BBNJ agreement, entered into force in January 2026. The BBNJ addresses gaps in the sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The Indian Ocean is vast. We, the coastal states of the Indian Ocean, are already hard-pressed to manage our EEZs. This is why UNCLOS, BBNJ, and the two other implementation agreements under UNCLOS are welcome. Their legal frameworks provide the context in which we can work towards our collective stewardship of Indian Ocean governance. Those UN legal frameworks provide the context in which the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association operate, respectively, for peace and stability in our region of the Indian Ocean, and for socio-economic and other peaceful considerations. Both organisations are, in fact, hosted by Mauritius.

Our cooperation with parties in the Indian Ocean, such as Exercise Cutlass Express led by the USA and Exercise PAPANGUE led by France, contributes to the upholding and respect for those UN legal instruments. More recently, following the recognition of Mauritius's sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, half a century after our independence in 1968, Mauritius has initiated action to establish a marine protected area in the archipelago and to campaign for the protection and preservation of the terrestrial and marine environments of the archipelago. This project is being organised with the support of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the British authorities, as both Mauritius and the UK share the same environmental ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

Our commitment to the Indian Ocean cannot be ignored. We must look beyond our shores and towards the horizon. We will work with the region, with the states of the Indian Ocean Rim, and with partners - be they states or organisations beyond the Indian Ocean - to enhance collective governance of the ocean. We also acknowledge the contributions of our partners: Australia, France, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, in enhancing our governance capacities for the Indian Ocean.

Mauritius Prime Minister, the Honourable Dr Navin Chandra Ramgoolam, highlighted India's MAHASAGAR, which has expanded India's maritime vision beyond the Indian Ocean while maintaining its focus on the Global South. Behind this vision lies the practical reality of India's multifaceted contribution to the collective governance of the Indian Ocean, whether through its current chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or through its Information Fusion Centre, which enhances maritime safety and security in the Indian Ocean region by sharing information on threats such as piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking. India's Information Fusion Centre aligns with the information feeds from the Regional Coordination Operations Centre in Seychelles and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar, both supported by the European Union.

Although at the antipodes of Mauritius, Australia contributes significantly to the Indian Ocean security architecture through its chairmanship of the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security. Japan is equally far from Mauritius; yet the government's commitment to taking Mauritius-Japan relations to a new level is evidenced by our opening an embassy in Tokyo in October 2025, during Prime Minister Navin Chandra Ramgoolam's participation in the 9th Tokyo International Conference on African Development, at which the then-Prime Minister Ishiba announced Japan's economic region initiative for the Indian Ocean-Africa. The initiative seeks to promote Africa's regional integration and industrial development in the Indian Ocean-Africa economic region, thereby contributing to global economic growth.

The states of the Indian Ocean are thus aligned on the relevance of collective stewardship for the Indian Ocean. We are looking into developing our port with eventual support from India. This development will undoubtedly contribute to our national development, but the expansion of our port facilities and infrastructure will also facilitate the servicing of all Indian Ocean states, Indian Ocean partners, and state entities beyond the Indian Ocean, thereby improving Indian Ocean governance. It is through the enhancement of collective capacity, bilateral and organisational, that the collective stewardship of the Indian Ocean will gain credibility.

Mauritius is committed to collective stewardship in the governance of the Indian Ocean. Since independence, we have been convinced that multilateralism is the preferred path towards the collective good. This has been our approach to recognising our territorial integrity, promoting the interests of small island developing states, and governing the Indian Ocean. We live in troubled times marked by geopolitical and existential challenges. All of us here today are different; we have different histories and will travel different pathways, yet our presence here at this conference reflects our common interest in the Indian Ocean. Its reach, whether economic, financial, or security-related, extends far beyond the shores of its littoral states. I believe that more than ever, it behoves us to work on our shared interest for our greater good, both today and tomorrow.

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Upholding Order and Prosperity: Australia's Vision for the Indian Ocean

Penny Wong*

There has been a significant change in our region and the world since Australia hosted the Indian Ocean Conference just two years ago. The prosperity, peace, and resilience we seek are being seriously challenged. We all know that the conflict in the Middle East has had far-reaching implications for our region. As Indian Ocean countries, we are grappling with the profound implications for energy supplies, agricultural products, and economic growth.

This crisis only underscores the global importance of the Indian Ocean region and the relevance of this year's theme, "Collective stewardship for Indian Ocean governance". Australia wants a region that is peaceful and predictable, governed by accepted rules and norms, where we can all cooperate, trade, and thrive. That is why the Indian Ocean Conference and key Indian Ocean institutions, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), remain so important. Australia and India have been co-leading the IORA Maritime Safety and Security Working Group over the past two years, and that work has only become more vital given the uncertainty and instability we face.

Iran's de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz, together with its attacks on commercial vessels, civilian infrastructure, and oil and gas facilities, has triggered unprecedented energy supply shocks and undermined our shared security and prosperity. We will continue working with international partners to support diplomatic efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, so that critical supplies can reach those who need them, including the most vulnerable.

To this end, we welcome the agreement by the United States, Israel, and Iran for a two-week ceasefire to negotiate a resolution to the conflict in the Middle East. The implications of the Middle East conflict underscore the importance of working together to support peace in our region and beyond. Australia will always remain a principled Indian Ocean power and a reliable Indian Ocean partner because this region is our region, and together we determine its character and decide its future. Working together, we can achieve a shared vision of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indian Ocean region.

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Weathering the Global Storm: Collective Stewardship in the Indian Ocean

Khalilur Rahman*

We are all in trouble, as current energy challenges are causing disruptions that will reverberate for years to come. Some analysts say this crisis will have implications much larger than the twin oil shocks we saw in the 1970s - the 1974 oil embargo and the 1979 Iranian revolution. And we all know that, immediately thereafter, the 1980s became a lost decade of development for developing countries. So, if the effects of the current crisis are larger than those of the 1970s shocks, we can imagine the risks we are facing.

This is the immediate problem, but a larger issue is the context in which it is happening. The kind of orderly world - which was not that orderly, but orderly enough for us to comfortably believe that the global system would take care of our problems - is unfortunately under very serious pressure. We see assaults on multilateralism and the increasing prevalence of unilateral actions. And the global frameworks, be they a system of legal instruments or international organisations, are no longer helping us effectively to deal with these issues. This is a time that should logically propel us towards collective action, because individual countries would not be able to meet the challenges by themselves.

For that reason, I believe the theme of the Indian Ocean Conference is extremely apt. Unless we are able to collectively steward governance of the Indian Ocean, we will not be able to withstand, by our individual actions, the challenges we face today. There might be a ceasefire, but the energy issue is not going to be resolved in two weeks. Even if the energy situation improves in two years, we still have this larger problem of the decline of multilateralism.

The Indian Ocean region, with its over two billion people, will have a lot to lose in the coming years if we are not able to collectively address the issues we face today. Seas and oceans are not separate spaces, nor are they spaces that separate us. Over centuries, our own ocean, the Indian Ocean, has kept connecting ideas, traders, travellers, and cultures. And in these challenging times, it is essential that our countries cooperate while competing at the same time. Across all our blue waters, our common people are drawn to the aspirations they share.

Now nearly two months into office, Bangladesh Prime Minister Tariq articulates his development agenda by envisioning the resolution of issues within and beyond borders for a shared future, in which our collective actions in the Indian Ocean region feature prominently. We also face other serious challenges, including a very young population across these nations, with a median age of around 30 years. Our young people seek opportunities far afield, within and beyond the Indian Ocean region. People move across sectors

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in diverse ways. Now, ensuring the safe, orderly, and responsible mobility of people within our region's burgeoning service economy is both a reality and a necessity.

Our seas are also the principal arteries of global commerce. Freedom of navigation is essential to conducting international trade safely and smoothly. The economic security of our entire region depends critically on this freedom, which we must collectively defend. If we don't, it will not be defended. This ocean belongs to all of us; all who live by it depend on it and dream through it. In these challenging times, our blue waters must unite, sustain, and inspire us far more than before.

We need to articulate a vision in which all of us take collective action seriously. We all have a great deal to lose if we don't do this. I trust that the deliberations over the next couple of days will help you in your task of fashioning actions that will help us overcome the current challenges and define our collective efforts to secure a common future through effective stewardship of our ocean and the adjoining areas.

The countries around the Indian Ocean are not sitting idle. For example, Bangladesh benefits from India's support in supplying diesel via a pipeline at a time when prices are skyrocketing. Other countries are also working together to face this challenge, but I would say that the larger challenge of the loss of trust and confidence in the global system will have to be replaced by our own actions. If we stay strong on our home front, it will be much easier for us to weather storms coming from outside.

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Climate Justice and Maritime Security: The Seychelles Agenda

Barry Faure*

I wish to congratulate Mauritius, the first African country to host the Indian Ocean Conference. And yes, Mauritius and Seychelles together charted a path to collective stewardship in 2012, when we founded the Joint Management Area over approximately 400,000 square kilometres of ocean in the Saya de Malha, a key international example of ocean governance.

We must recognise a fundamental truth: while stewardship is a shared responsibility in principle, it is not a burden shared equally in practice. What is the reality for large ocean states? For nations like Mauritius and Seychelles, we are often labelled as Small Island Developing States, but in the context of this conference, we are large ocean states. While our landmasses may be modest, the maritime territories we manage are vast.

The Indian Ocean is not merely a strategic space; it is the shared economic lifeline sustaining our entire region. Today, that lifeline is under immense strain. Tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb are reshaping maritime activity before our eyes. We see shipping routes adjusted, insurance conditions tightened, and transit times lengthened. For import-dependent economies like ours, these are not abstract geopolitical shifts; they translate directly into higher living costs and mounting pressure on our tourism, fisheries and food supply. What happens at sea shapes what happens on land.

Stewardship as a public good: Seychelles and our neighbours in the western Indian Ocean provide a public good to the public and the global community. We secure key corridors against sea piracy and maritime crime. We manage the health of the beating heart of our economies to ensure the ocean remains a space of shared opportunity. Yet the cost of this stewardship is immense. As shipping patterns shift, activity in our waters is increasing, placing growing demands on our port infrastructure, maritime services, and logistical coordination. Reliability is the currency of global trade, and for island states, that currency is under extreme pressure.

Redefining resilience, the Multi-Dimensional Vulnerability Index and climate justice are key foreign policy priorities for countries like ours. Governance cannot be effective if the stewards of the ocean are denied the tools to build resilience. The current global financial architecture often fails to recognise our reality. We are frequently penalised by traditional metrics that focus solely on income, ignoring the inherent fragilities of being an island nation. We call for the urgent and full implementation of the Multi-Dimensional Vulnerability Index, adopted a year ago by the United Nations General Assembly. We must move beyond an outdated obsession with GDP. Furthermore, we cannot discuss governance without addressing climate justice. Our people are

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on the front lines of a climate crisis they did not create. True stewardship requires that those who benefit most from these blue corridors contribute fairly to their protection. Security is the prerequisite for prosperity, but sustainability is the prerequisite for survival.

Seychelles remains committed to practical cooperation. We are honoured to chair the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities. We recognise that partnerships multiply capacity and that shared challenges demand shared responses. However, collective stewardship must now move beyond principle and into practice. This requires: One, investment in infrastructure to strengthen port efficiency and sustainable maritime connectivity, reducing reliance on limited, vulnerable transit routes. Two, securing digital frontiers. Recognising that the maritime domain is now as much digital as it is physical, we must protect critical undersea cables that underpin global finance and communications. Three, unlocking the blue economy. Not simply using the ocean, but sustaining its value through marine innovation, sustainable aquaculture, and ocean-based services.

Effective enforcement to ensure operational responses is backed by strong legal frameworks. Without investigation and prosecution, there can be no deterrence, and without deterrence, no lasting stability.

In conclusion, the Indian Ocean does not divide us; it defines us. How we choose to govern it today will shape our region's future for generations to come. Stability in this ocean cannot be taken for granted. The stakes could not be higher. Let us work together to ensure the Indian Ocean remains open, secure, and economically vibrant - a shared platform of opportunity for us all.

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Navigating Shared Waters: Bhutan's Vision for Indian Ocean Governance

D N Dhungyel*

Although Bhutan is a landlocked country, we are intrinsically connected to the Indian Ocean through ecological systems, trade, and other forms of connectivity. The Indian Ocean had long served us as a gateway for Bhutan and a vital link for our trade and connectivity with nations in the region and beyond.

Our access to the Indian Ocean is through India, which has been steadfast in its support for strengthening trade and connectivity routes. This unwavering support from the Government of India has not only made Bhutan's access to the ocean possible but has also significantly contributed to Bhutan's economic prosperity. Transport corridors and logistics hubs are being strengthened to foster a more integrated and connected future.

The Indian Ocean is not only a vital artery of global trade but also an important link for cultural exchange and ecological diversity. The ocean has sustained the livelihoods of millions of people and has connected us with one another. It is important that we continue to recognise our shared heritage across the ocean. The Indian Ocean is also a vast carbon sink, absorbing carbon and is critical to the global fight against rising temperatures and climate change. The ocean regulates regional weather, including monsoons and rainfall patterns, on which millions depend.

The Indian Ocean, however, faces numerous challenges, ranging from climate change and marine degradation to geopolitical competition. Any further degradation of the ocean will have a catastrophic impact not only on coastal areas but also on countries such as the Himalayan nation of Bhutan. The rapid melting of glaciers in the Himalayas due to rising temperatures is a serious challenge and a threat that Bhutan is facing at the moment. Similarly, the erratic and heavy monsoon storms that we increasingly experience are causing huge losses to livelihoods and national infrastructure.

It's also vital to safeguard freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean in accordance with international law. The ongoing conflicts around the world have shown that, despite geographic distance, any action that impairs freedom of navigation can have devastating effects on countries worldwide. What happens in the Indian Ocean matters to all of us; its health, security, and governance shape the future of our region.

Bhutan has not been able to shield itself from the impacts of the global fuel shortage caused by the ongoing conflicts. Overnight, fuel prices doubled, leading to a sharp increase in the cost of living for the people. While the Royal Government of Bhutan is making every effort to mitigate the impact, our citizens continue to bear the brunt, particularly those in low-income groups. As the COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on our economy, these conflicts and their subsequent

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effect on the cost of living are likely to undo all the recovery we have made since the pandemic.

Given our strong dependence on the Indian Ocean, it is pertinent that we continue to build collective stewardship of the ocean and strengthen its governance. It's heartening to see, here today, recognition that the Indian Ocean is a common heritage and a shared space, guided by principles of inclusivity, mutual respect, transparency, and adherence to international law. The discussions we have already had on shifting from competition to cooperation, from short-term gains to long-term sustainability, and from fragmented approaches to holistic governance of the ocean are highly encouraging.

Bhutan believes that we should continue to strengthen regional institutions, foster dialogue, and promote trust-building measures, all of which are key to minimising challenges and enhancing collaboration across the Indian Ocean region. We firmly believe that no single nation can effectively manage the complex and interconnected issues of the Indian Ocean alone. It is important that we, as a region, come together to safeguard the many aspects of the ocean.

Bhutan would also call for enhanced economic cooperation by promoting blue economy initiatives such as sustainable fisheries, renewable ocean energy, and eco-tourism, which, while unlocking shared prosperity, also preserve the ocean's health. As emphasised by our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, harmony between human progress and environmental conservation is highly relevant to Indian Ocean governance. Our collective efforts should focus on the sustainable use of marine resources, the protection of biodiversity, and urgent action on climate change.

It is against this backdrop, and recognising that areas beyond national jurisdiction remain the common heritage of mankind, Bhutan has been actively following the BBNJ (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction) preparatory commission sessions and has also undertaken preliminary discussions on the process. From converting our shared challenges into shared opportunities to embracing collective stewardship of our common good, and from enhancing cooperation in a polarised world where prosperity is shared, our ecosystems are protected, and peace is preserved, Bhutan stands ready to contribute to this shared vision.

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Nepal's Vision for Collective Stewardship

Shisir Khanal*

It is an honour to address the Ninth Indian Ocean Conference here in Mauritius—a nation that reflects the diversity and dynamism of the Indian Ocean community. I bring the warm greetings and best wishes of the Government and people of Nepal. For Nepal, collective stewardship begins with a simple recognition: the fate of the mountains and the ocean is inextricably linked.

As we gather here, we cannot ignore the conflicts unfolding in the Middle East. For Nepal, these are not distant events. Millions of Nepali citizens live and work in the region, and their safety remains our foremost concern. We have already lost one life, and others have been injured. The consequences extend far beyond the region, affecting fuel prices, supply chains, and livelihoods back home. These disruptions remind us that the stability of the Indian Ocean is inseparable from global peace.

The theme of this year's Conference—"Collective Stewardship for Indian Ocean Governance"—could not be more apt. Climate change, maritime security threats, disruptions to global supply chains, and widening inequalities demand not only cooperation but genuine collective stewardship. In the view of the Government of Nepal, stewardship means moving beyond narrow self-interest towards shared responsibility for our global commons. This requires inclusive, transparent, and rules-based multilateral frameworks. These must be anchored in international law and guided by the principles of sovereign equality, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. Our governance must be equitable, ecological, and, above all, inclusive of those in the landlocked interior who rely on the ocean.

Nepal may be a landlocked nation, but our ties to the Indian Ocean are ancient, organic, and inseparable. Long before the age of modern diplomacy, Nepali traders, pilgrims, and scholars travelled along routes linking the high Himalayas to the shores of this great ocean. These routes were not merely for trade; they were conduits for ideas. The philosophies and traditions that form our shared civilizational heritage flowed along these currents. Most notably, these shores carried the teachings of Gautama Buddha, who was born in the sacred gardens of Lumbini, Nepal.

The Buddhist principle of "*Pratîtyasamutpada*" (प्रतित्यसमुत्पद), the law of dependent origination, teaches us that nothing exists in isolation. This teaching reminds us that all phenomena arise in dependence on other causes and conditions. Today, we see this ancient wisdom reflected in modern science and geopolitics. The Indian Ocean and the Himalayas are not distant strangers; they are bound together by ecology, hydrology, and destiny. The Hindu Kush Himalaya region is the primary source of fresh water for billions of people. The glaciers and snowfields of Nepal feed the great river systems that ultimately discharge into the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the health of the mountains and the health of the ocean are inseparable.

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Climate change has laid bare this interdependence in the most alarming ways. As Nepal's glaciers retreat at unprecedented rates, we face the imminent threat of glacial lake outburst floods that endanger entire communities. At the same time, the Indian Ocean is warming faster than any other ocean, driving sea-level rise that threatens the very existence of low-lying island states and coastal communities. What melts in the mountains eventually rises in the seas. Nepal has been vocal about this nexus at the United Nations and at COP summits. We have also established Sagarmatha Sambaad, our flagship global dialogue platform, to address the future of humanity through the lens of climate change and the mountain-ocean link. We call upon this Conference to formally recognise this ecological bridge as a critical dimension of Indian Ocean governance. Our stewardship must encompass both the peaks and the waters, for they rise and fall together.

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Nepal reaffirms its commitment to the foundational framework of the law of the sea. We emphasise that landlocked nations have inherent rights to access the high seas and to participate in the maritime economy. These are not privileges granted by geography but rights enshrined in international law.

The Indian Ocean is central to global trade and energy flows. Its stability is therefore a global responsibility. Nepal is deeply concerned about threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, and illicit trafficking in drugs and human beings. These challenges affect real lives, including those of Nepali citizens who travel across these waters in search of livelihoods. We support the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and international law. Nepal's foreign policy is firmly grounded in the UN Charter, the principles of Panchsheel, and non-alignment. We call for a rules-based international order in which the rights of all nations, large and small, are respected.

As I conclude, every time I hear of the ocean, I am reminded of the ancient story from the Hindu text Samundra Manthan—the Churning of the Ocean. In the story, the ocean was churned by the rival Devas and Asuras. But, for once, they decided to collaborate to churn the ocean for Amrit, the nectar of immortality. Yet, before the nectar could emerge, the churning released the Halahala, a lethal poison that threatened to consume all of creation. It was Lord Shiva who, in an act of ultimate stewardship and profound compassion, stepped forward to consume the poison to save the world. The poison was so powerful that even Shiva's neck burned blue, and to soothe his burning throat, he sought sanctuary in the Himalayas of Nepal.

This story is a powerful metaphor for our times. Today's world requires Karuna—compassion and empathy—from everyone, especially those who hold great power, much like Shiva himself. This compassion must extend not only to human beings but also to all living and non-living beings—the marine life in our depths and the ecosystems on our peaks.

We are bound not only by geography but also by shared responsibility. Nepal stands ready—as a partner in dialogue, a voice for the landlocked, and a bridge between the mountains and the ocean. Let us move forward in the spirit of "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah"—May all beings be happy.

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The African Imperative: Strengthening Collective Governance in the Indian Ocean

Mahmoud Thabit Kombo*

The Indian Ocean is the lifeblood of our region. For landlocked nations and coastal states alike, it is the fundamental driver of trade, food security, and energy stability. In Tanzania, the ocean's significance is absolute: with a GDP per capita of $1,400, 60% of our population relies on maritime activities—fishing, trade, logistics, and mariculture—for their livelihoods. Furthermore, 70% of our national economy, both domestic and external, is inextricably linked to these waters.

Our region faces significant, interconnected threats that require coordinated regional responses. We are witnessing mounting pressure on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Competition for trade routes and the threat of disruptions to strategic passages, such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, have direct consequences for our economies.

As developing nations, we face difficult choices. We must balance limited budgets between essential social services—such as health and education—and the high costs of maritime security, including patrolling our Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Climate change is driving rising salinity and disrupting the migration and reproduction of marine species. Pollution and plastic waste remain critical threats. Addressing these issues requires more than local action; it requires global and regional stewardship. We are a "food basket," exporting grains and foodstuffs, and our role in regional food security is threatened by the same climatic and security factors that endanger global trade.

I applaud the existing collaborative efforts through IORA, the Indo-Pacific initiatives, and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA). However, we must do more to ensure inclusivity. Currently, participation in the Indian Ocean Conference is heavily dominated by Asian countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Yet over half of Africa is economically, strategically, and logistically bound to the Indian Ocean. We need our African neighbours—from Egypt to South Africa—to have a more active voice.

Moving forward, Tanzania is committed to a rules-based maritime order. We are actively implementing policies to combat plastic pollution, promote the growth of the Blue Economy, and advocate deeper cooperation among states with differing GDPs and capacities. We must move beyond treating these conferences as mere dialogue. We need actionable, well-resourced cooperation. Tanzania stands ready to work closely with Mauritius, Seychelles, and all our partners to bring more African nations into this fold and to champion a collaborative future for the Indian Ocean. We hope to have the honour of hosting a future edition of this conference.

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From Regional Cooperation to Maritime Security: The Evolving Role of BIMSTEC

Indra Mani Pandey*

The salience of regional organisations has grown amid the financial and other challenges faced by global multilateral institutions, such as the UN and other international organisations. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic regional organisation.

BIMSTEC shares the vision of a free, peaceful, stable and prosperous IOR. The BIMSTEC Charter and the Bangkok BIMSTEC Vision 2030 commit member States to pursue the goal of a prosperous, resilient and open Bay of Bengal Region, a vital sub-region of the IOR. The importance of freedom of navigation has been highlighted by various speakers before me. Iran's decision to block the Hormuz Strait and its devastating consequences for global energy security, food security and trade and transport have brought maritime governance in the IOR into sharp focus. Iran's action has shattered the longstanding assumption that coastal states would never resort to closing the Straits and choking global energy supplies and trade.

In the context of International Law, accepting Iran's right to control passage through the Strait of Hormuz will have long-lasting repercussions. There are other straits in the IOR and beyond that are critically important for global energy and trade flows, and acceptance of Iran's claim to control passage through the Strait of Hormuz will set a dangerous precedent. Under International Law, there is an established right of transit passage, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Article 44 of UNCLOS imposes a direct and unambiguous obligation on States bordering international straits. It states, "States bordering straits shall not hamper transit passage", and "there shall be no suspension of transit passage". Under UNCLOS, there is no exception for security or for war.

This right of transit passage is also part of customary international law and applies to States that may not have signed or ratified the UNCLOS. It is necessary to reiterate the right of passage as provided in Article 44 of the UNCLOS and in customary international law, and to oppose any attempts to violate it. Other legal instruments relevant to maritime security, connectivity, and the preservation of marine resources and ecosystems provide a framework for collective governance of the IOR. The need to act together, both regionally and globally, to preserve freedom of navigation and address other maritime security challenges is more acute than ever. We need to define future pathways for regional maritime cooperation.

The Bay of Bengal is a critically important sub-region of the IOR. It connects South Asia to South East Asia, and a large share of global energy and trade flows through it. BIMSTEC serves as a

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bridge between South Asia and South East Asia, with five members from South Asia - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka - and two from South East Asia - Myanmar and Thailand. BIMSTEC has its own charter. Regional cooperation under BIMSTEC is also guided by its vision document, BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030. BIMSTEC has core and sectoral mechanisms to foster cooperation. It has a broad agenda comprising 18 sectors. Across these areas, there are joint working groups or expert groups.

Member States have concluded Action Plans that are now being implemented. All our Member States serve as Lead Member States, leading cooperation across various sectors. BIMSTEC has already concluded conventions, agreements, and MoUs in various areas; many are under negotiation. We have already established three Centres of Excellence; eight more are in the process of being established.

Given the Bay of Bengal's centrality to BIMSTEC, the organisation has naturally attached high priority to maritime cooperation. BIMSTEC has taken initiatives to strengthen maritime connectivity. The BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation was signed at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok in April 2025. Three member States have already ratified it. A Joint Shipping Committee is being set up to implement the agreement.

India has hosted two editions of the BIMSTEC Ports Conclave, which brings together port authorities from member States and contributes to strengthening maritime connectivity. India has proposed the establishment of a Centre of Excellence on Maritime Transport, which will serve as an anchor for strengthening maritime transport cooperation.

Maritime security cooperation has focused on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Oil Pollution Response, and related areas. The BIMSTEC Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation has finalised guidelines for maritime law enforcement agencies to ensure effective coordination during interactions at sea. India has proposed to host the BIMSTEC Multilateral Maritime Security Exercise in the last quarter of 2026. BIMSTEC Member States will consider future initiatives to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for cooperation among BIMSTEC maritime security agencies, enabling real-time intelligence sharing to counter cross-border maritime crimes.

In the MDA, there's a proposal to conclude the BIMSTEC White Shipping Agreement. India will soon present a draft for the consideration of the member States. BIMSTEC has established an Expert Group on the Blue Economy to promote the sustainable use of marine resources. The Group will meet soon. Recognising the severe economic and environmental consequences of marine oil spills, BIMSTEC has finalised guidelines for a coordinated regional oil spill response. Proposed initiatives include the development of a regional contingency plan, standardised emergency procedures, joint pollution response exercises, and capacity-building programmes to enhance preparedness.

Regarding HADR in the maritime domain, the Expert Group on Maritime Security has finalised BIMSTEC guidelines on the maritime component

of HADR. The Bay of Bengal is highly vulnerable to natural disasters. A Plan of Action on Comprehensive Disaster Management has been finalised. Four editions of the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise have been held to strengthen joint operational capabilities. Additionally, India has proposed establishing a BIMSTEC Disaster Management Centre to serve as a focal point for coordinating regional HADR operations. BIMSTEC has also been pursuing collaboration with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) to enhance disaster response and resilience in the Bay of Bengal region. BIMSTEC has thus taken a number of initiatives to enhance maritime cooperation, including maritime security cooperation, and is committed to deepening it in future.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few recommendations:

- Firstly, given the existing and emerging traditional and non-traditional maritime challenges, it is imperative to strengthen regional and sub-regional maritime cooperation in the IOR through the existing regional platforms. Cooperation in maritime safety and security, maritime connectivity, the management of maritime resources, and the protection of the maritime ecosystem should be expanded and deepened.
- Secondly, these platforms should also endeavour to foster regional cooperation in critical areas of energy and food security, and in enhancing intra-regional trade and the regionalisation of supply chains, in order to deal with disruptions in global flows of energy and trade.
- Thirdly, various regional platforms in the IOR, which have maritime cooperation on their agenda, such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, CSC, GCC, IFC-IOR, IOC IONS, and IORA, should engage in consultation, coordination and cooperation to share their knowledge and best practices and to benefit from one another's initiatives and programmes.
- Fourthly, since the existing regional organisations don't include all the IOR countries as members and aren't mandated to address the risk of disruption to maritime connectivity in the IOR, we should endeavour to create a new pan-IOR platform that will enable countries in the IOR to work together to ensure there's no disruption to the flow of energy and trade in the IOR due to the future closure of the Straits.

As an influential player in IOR, India has taken initiatives to enhance maritime cooperation in IOR, including establishing IFC-IOR, IONS, IORA, BIMSTEC, CSC, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. It's therefore heartening to know that India will be hosting the 10th IOC. India is well positioned to take the lead in creating a pan-IOR regional arrangement to ensure freedom of navigation and maritime security in IOR.

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Catalysing Regional Action: IORA's Role in Maritime Sustainability and Security

Sanjiv Ranjan*

The Indian Ocean is a dynamic hub shaping global trade, security, and environmental stability. Its strategic location makes it a vital corridor for shipping, resource extraction, and geopolitical engagement. The region is rich in natural resources, including oil and gas, mineral deposits, and fisheries, which support millions of livelihoods. These opportunities are significant, but they demand careful, sustainable management. At the same time, the region faces multiple transboundary pressures: climate change, sea-level rise, maritime crime, vulnerability to disasters, marine pollution, overfishing, and geopolitical tensions. These challenges cannot be addressed by any single country alone; they require coordinated, inclusive, and sustained regional action.

In this context, the theme of collective stewardship aligns closely with the mandate of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). IORA provides a unique platform to translate shared responsibility into concrete action. With 23 member states, 12 dialogue partners, and a network of regional and international partners, IORA facilitates dialogue, strengthens cooperation, and delivers practical outcomes. Over the past 30 years, IORA member states have worked together to promote a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indian Ocean region. The IORA Action Plan 2022-2027 sets out a roadmap for collaboration, capacity building, and measurable results, to be implemented through the work plans of our functional bodies and the active engagement of our member states across priority areas and cross-cutting issues. In this context, collective stewardship is not only a guiding principle; it is an imperative for the sustainable, secure, and prosperous management of the Indian Ocean.

Maritime safety and security is the foundation of stability and prosperity and the cornerstone of governance in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean hosts some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, facilitating the movement of goods between Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia. These routes are lifelines of global commerce, carrying vital resources such as oil and minerals, as well as manufactured goods. Ensuring their safety and security is a priority, as disruptions from piracy, instability, or natural disasters have consequences both regionally and globally. IORA promotes what may be termed maritime multilateralism to strengthen cooperation among member states. IORA member states have taken a wide range of initiatives that embody collective stewardship. These include, for example, search and rescue exercises, joint patrols, tabletop simulations to enhance operational readiness, capacity-building programmes on marine domain awareness and law enforcement, and real-time maritime information-sharing workshops at the Information Fusion

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Centre - Indian Ocean Region to facilitate the exchange of intelligence on transnational maritime threats. These are practical manifestations of IORA member states' resolve to provide collective leadership to ensure maritime safety and security.

Member states are also signatories to a search and rescue memorandum of understanding, which sets out guidelines for coordination and cooperation in Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Indian Ocean region, including workshops on maritime and aeronautical SAR operations and legal studies on implementing UNCLOS among IORA member states. Together with regional initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Dialogues, Bay of Bengal Dialogue, and the Galle Dialogue, these efforts have strengthened cooperation, harmonised standards, and built resilience across the region. Together, these efforts demonstrate how coordinated action, shared responsibility, and regional collaboration can safeguard the Indian Ocean, ensuring it remains secure, sustainable, and prosperous for all member states.

The stewardship also requires protecting coastal communities from natural hazards. Transboundary hazards such as cyclones, tsunamis, and rising sea levels affect multiple countries simultaneously, highlighting the need for coordinated regional policies on early warning systems, data sharing, and joint preparedness. Disasters can damage fisheries, ports, mangroves, and infrastructure, affecting marine ecosystems and livelihoods. Small island developing countries are at alarmingly high risk. Through IORA, member states have conducted joint HADR exercises, capacity-building workshops, and space-based disaster monitoring, and have collaborated on resilient infrastructure frameworks, such as the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, and on early warning systems with IOC-UNESCO's Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System. By sharing information, technology, and best practices, and by building collective resilience, member states demonstrate how coordinated action and collective stewardship safeguard lives, livelihoods, and marine ecosystems across the Indian Ocean region.

Sustainable fisheries are a critical component of the Indian Ocean governance framework, as the region's marine resources support millions of livelihoods, ensure food security, and contribute to regional economies. The shared nature of fisheries, migratory fish stocks, and transboundary impacts means that no single country can ensure sustainability alone. This makes collective stewardship essential; coordinated policies, information sharing, and joint monitoring are required to maintain healthy marine ecosystems and ensure equitable use of resources.

The challenges in the fisheries sector range from IUU fishing and climate change impacts to gaps in monitoring and enforcement, as well as a lack of legal frameworks and biosecurity measures. IORA has taken a number of steps to promote sustainable fisheries and combat IUU fishing through coordinated legal frameworks, capacity-building, technology, and partnerships. Examples of these efforts include the adoption of the IORA guidelines on combating IUU fishing, support for port state measures, and training and workshops on fisheries surveillance, aquaculture, biosecurity, and innovative management approaches. Collaboration with partners such as the Food and

Agriculture Organisation, regional exchanges, and pilot programmes for young environmental leaders also strengthens regional cooperation and shared responsibility for sustainable fisheries across the Indian Ocean region.

The Indian Ocean is a biodiversity hotspot, home to coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds that support marine life, protect coastlines, and aid carbon sequestration. These ecosystems underpin fisheries, livelihoods, and coastal resilience, and must be safeguarded for present and future generations. The seabed holds potential mineral wealth, including manganese nodules and cobalt-rich crusts. Sustainable use of these resources is central to the blue economy and ocean governance. Only sustainable use, careful management, and environmental protection can ensure that economic growth does not compromise ecological health. But the blue economy is not simply an environmental agenda; it is a development imperative that underpins livelihoods, food security, and long-term economic resilience. Promoting a cooperative, rules-based maritime environment consistent with international frameworks such as UNCLOS remains a shared interest among all IORA member states. IORA's cooperation with the International Seabed Authority further reinforces a rules-based approach to ocean governance, promoting the responsible and equitable management of seabed resources through collective stewardship.

Climate change is a defining challenge, and the Indian Ocean is increasingly vulnerable to its impacts. Rising sea temperatures are causing coral bleaching, disrupting marine ecosystems, and contributing to sea-level rise, which poses a serious risk to low-lying island nations and coastal communities, including displacement, damage to infrastructure, and increased vulnerability to storms and flooding. Ocean acidification is harming marine life, particularly shellfish and corals, while pollution from industrial waste, agricultural runoff, and plastic debris further threatens the ocean's health. IORA has responded to these interconnected threats through the climate change strategic agenda, integrating resilience and adaptation across all its priority areas.

Collaboration with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction on comprehensive risk management, including the integration of climate change adaptation into disaster risk management, is underway. Collective stewardship and regional cooperation are essential to safeguard marine ecosystems, coastal communities, and the long-term economic and social well-being of Indian Ocean nations. Without urgent action, ocean warming, acidification, and rising sea levels will have potentially devastating consequences for nature and our peoples. Renewable energy is another critical component of a resilient Indian Ocean region. Through cooperation with the International Renewable Energy Agency and the International Solar Alliance, IORA supports member states in advancing clean energy, strengthening capacity, and enhancing energy security, while contributing to climate mitigation efforts.

Strengthening human and institutional capacity is essential to effective ocean governance. Stewardship must translate into practical cooperation, with knowledge, data, and experience shared inclusively. Partnerships with regional and

international organisations are critical to scaling impact. IORA has responded by fostering strategic partnerships with regional and international organisations to enhance capacity building, technical cooperation, and knowledge exchange. Through joint programmes, training initiatives, and collaborative platforms, IORA enables member states to leverage shared expertise and resources, ensuring more effective and coordinated responses to regional challenges.

The governance of the Indian Ocean cannot be achieved by any single country. It requires a shared commitment, cooperation, and collective responsibility. International cooperation is crucial to addressing the complex challenges facing the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean can demonstrate that economic growth and ocean sustainability can go hand in hand if we act together and decisively. IORA remains committed to advancing a comprehensive and inclusive approach to ocean governance and to collective stewardship for peace, prosperity, and sustainability.

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Collective Stewardship for Indian Ocean Governance

Alok Bansal & Shristi Pukhrem*

Oceans beyond the immediate maritime zones have been a key global common, and since the beginning of human history, the human race has progressed by harnessing them and their resources. After the Second World War, rapid technological advances have further enhanced the importance of oceans by making them significant sources of hydrocarbons and critical minerals. Numerous laws were enacted to manage this critical medium and its resources. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries were initially dominated by events in the Atlantic Ocean and subsequently by those in the Pacific. All the while, the Indian Ocean remained in the background.

Today, the Indian Ocean is no longer merely a "neglected ocean" or a secondary theatre of global geopolitics. It has become the epicentre of global energy and trade corridors, through which one-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of its oil shipments pass. Yet this vital expanse—stretching from the African coast to the Indonesian archipelago and Australia—faces a "tragedy of the commons" on a monumental scale. Overfishing, maritime piracy, plastic pollution, contested maritime zones and the escalating climate crisis threaten the structural integrity of littoral states. To secure the region's future, the paradigm must shift from competitive exploitation to collective stewardship.

The Geopolitical and Ecological Imperative

Unlike the Pacific and the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean is unique. Geographically, it is bounded to the north by the vast Eurasian Landmass and consequently has no opening to the North Pole, which restricts access and creates significant choke points of immense geopolitical significance. Geoeconomically, it is predominantly an ocean of the "developing world". Unlike the North Atlantic, the IOR is characterised by vast disparities in economic capability and maritime infrastructure. Consequently, most countries are constrained to focus on short-term gains rather than the collective

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good. This creates a fragmented security architecture in which non-traditional threats—such as Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and transnational maritime crimes—thrive in the gaps between national jurisdictions.

The Indian Ocean also faces a significant ecological threat, as it is warming faster than the global average. Global warming and the consequent rise in sea levels erode coastlines and vast mangrove forests. It also threatens the very existence of some island nations, such as the Maldives. Many of them lack resources, and even those with resources often bear the consequences of others' actions. As a result, there is a pressing need for a unified response to tackle these problems. The degradation of coral reefs and the acidification of waters do not confine themselves to Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Therefore, governance must transition from a state-centric "security" model to a holistic "stewardship" model.

Today, collective stewardship is not merely a diplomatic preference; it is an existential necessity.

Pillars of Collective Stewardship

For a strategy of collective stewardship to be effective, it must be built on three functional pillars:

1. Integrated Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

Stewardship begins with observation. Currently, many littoral states lack the technological capacity to monitor their own waters. Collective stewardship requires a "plug-and-play" data-sharing environment.

- Action: Strengthening hubs like India's Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to act as a transparent clearing house for real-time data on vessel movements.
- Goal: To eliminate "blind spots" that allow for illegal poaching and environmental dumping.

2. The Blue Economy and Sustainable Resource Management

The Indian Ocean holds roughly 15mu% of the world's total fish catch. However, fish stocks are migratory. If one nation over-extracts, the entire ecosystem suffers.

- Collective Approach: Establishing regional quotas and shared "no-take" marine protected areas (MPAs), as well as "no-fishing" periods, so that fish stocks can recover and biodiversity is preserved.
- Incentive: Moving towards "Blue Carbon" credits, in which nations are financially rewarded for preserving mangroves and seagrasses that sequester carbon.

3. Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Adaptation

The IOR is one of the world's most disaster-prone regions. It is affected by cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and by rising sea levels, which exact a heavy toll on human lives and resources.

- Stewardship in Action: It is almost impossible to deal with mega-disasters individually. The human and material resources required within a short time frame are usually not available to a single country. Hence, there is a need to create a regional "Climate Response Force" with shared early-warning systems. This would move the needle from reactive humanitarian aid to proactive collective resilience.

Challenges to the Stewardship Model

The primary obstacle to collective governance is the "Great Power Rivalry." The growing militarisation of the Indian Ocean by extra-regional powers often forces littoral states to make binary choices, while undermining regional solidarity. When naval competition takes centre stage, environmental conservation and soft-security cooperation are often pushed to the background.

In addition, the region suffers from a significant "Capability-Capacity Gap". While a large state may still have the assets to patrol its vast maritime zones, including the high seas, smaller states often struggle to enforce maritime law within their own waters. Collective stewardship requires a "security as a service" model, in which larger maritime forces provide training and support to smaller coast guards without infringing on sovereignty. This requires common operating procedures, compatible communications and frequent interactions amongst them.

Frameworks for Cooperation: IORA and Beyond

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is the natural vehicle for this stewardship. However, IORA must move beyond ministerial declarations to concrete actions. Some of these initiatives are listed below.

Challenges: Great Power Rivalry and the Capacity Gap

The primary obstacle to this model is the "Great Power Rivalry." The increasing militarisation of the Indian Ocean by extra-regional powers and the resulting contestation often force littoral states to make binary choices. Invariably, when power projection takes centre stage, environmental conservation is pushed to the background.

Furthermore, there is a significant Capability-Capacity Gap. While large nations like Australia, India, or Indonesia might have the assets to patrol vast areas, smaller states with extensive maritime zones often struggle to even conduct law enforcement in their territorial waters. Collective stewardship requires pooling resources, with larger navies providing training and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to smaller coast guards, enabling them to focus on "soft security" issues such as disaster relief and the preservation of marine ecology rather than projecting just "hard power".

Focus Area	Proposed Initiative
Legal	Steps need to be taken to harmonize maritime laws to ensure that the "flags of convenience" cannot be used to bypass environmental regulations.
Technical	Share research vessels and expertise to map the Indian Ocean floor and monitor acidification levels.
Diplomatic	Adopting a "Code of Conduct" for the Indian Ocean that prioritizes ecological stability over military posturing.

The Path Forward: A "G-IOR" Framework

To institutionalise collective stewardship, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) must be empowered. It is proposed to establish a "G-IOR" (Group of Indian Ocean Residents)—a dedicated working group focused exclusively on the linkages between climate change and maritime security.

Conclusion: Managing the Commons

The Indian Ocean is the lifeblood of the 21st century. The era of viewing the ocean as an infinite resource to be guarded by individual navies is over. Collective stewardship offers a middle path: one that respects national sovereignty while acknowledging complete ecological and economic interdependence.

By prioritising the health of the ocean over competition for its surface, the littoral states of the Indian Ocean can create a blueprint for maritime governance that is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. The choice is clear: either we manage the commons together, or we witness their collapse individually. The Indian Ocean does not belong to the states that border it; the states belong to it. Stewardship is the only way to honour that relationship.

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India and the Bay of Bengal: A Catalyst for Regional Integration and Prosperity

Preeti Saran*

The Bay of Bengal is a natural waterway linking India to Southeast Asia. It is a rich, biodiverse region, shaped by the monsoons that determine food and water security, livelihoods and navigation. India shares land and/or maritime boundaries with all the countries around the Bay of Bengal. India is the foremost link for regional connectivity, prosperity and security. India's participation, cooperation and facilitation are essential to the smooth flow of goods, services and people across this wider geography.

Countries in the region share a civilisational connection, bound by history, language, culture, costumes, textiles, dance, music, religion, agricultural practices, cuisine, dietary habits, and myriad other commonalities and cultural traditions. The ancient Hindu and Buddhist temples in Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand are living examples of deep-rooted historical, religious and commercial links. Accounts of monsoon-linked trade routes between India and Southeast Asia are legendary. This includes the 'Bali Jatra' of Odisha, yet another example of affinity among the people of India and Southeast Asia from ancient times. This civilisational connectivity has played an important role in India's renewed engagement with the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia, including invigorated bilateral strategic partnerships and engagements through ASEAN mechanisms, namely the regular ASEAN-India bilateral summits, the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation.

The Northeastern states of India form a unique land bridge between India and Southeast Asia, spanning cultural, ethnic, linguistic and historical ties. These states have emerged as major connectivity hubs, with networks of roads, railways, waterways, grids, and pipelines. Once completed, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway will connect India's North East to the Pacific Ocean. India has focused its efforts on regional integration, keeping this geo-strategic factor in mind.

The fallout from the ongoing conflict in West Asia reveals the flip side of an interconnected and interdependent world. The Bay of Bengal, although ensconced within its own geographical space in the northeast of the Indian Ocean, is not immune to developments elsewhere. The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz and the destruction of energy infrastructure have adversely affected global trade and energy supplies. If the conflict escalates further or persists longer, it will seriously affect the growth

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prospects of littoral states around the Bay of Bengal, undermining their energy and food security, inward remittances, and the livelihoods of millions.

Smaller neighbours have approached India for support to address the current energy crisis. With the longest coastline on the Bay of Bengal and as the first responder in times of crisis, India will step in to help, as it did during the COVID pandemic and other past calamities and natural disasters.

Even as we take stock of our response to the new threats and challenges emerging from developments in West Asia, this is an opportune moment for countries around the Bay of Bengal to recall the rationale for strengthening cooperation, given India's links with Southeast Asia. Enhancing regional cooperation, notably through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), is imperative. As articulated by Dr S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister of India, during the Ministerial meeting before the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok on April 3, 2025: "What we make of our prospects is very much dependent on ourselves. As developing nations who face a multitude of challenges, that is better done in concert with each other than individually".

Since its establishment, BIMSTEC has become the obvious choice for regional cooperation among the seven member states - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The inclusion of two landlocked Himalayan countries alongside five littoral states underscores the ecosystem's composite nature.

BIMSTEC promotes regional cooperation across seven broad pillars: Agriculture and Food Security; Connectivity; Environment and Climate Change; People-to-People Contact; Science, Technology and Innovation; Security; and Trade, Investment and Development. Cooperation spans eight sub-sectors: Blue Economy, Mountain Economy, Energy, Disaster Management, Fisheries and Livestock, Poverty Alleviation, and Health and Human Resource Development.

The 6th BIMSTEC Summit Declaration, the Bangkok Vision 2030, and the Eminent Persons Group Report have provided the organisation with a clear direction and a roadmap for collective prosperity. The conclusion of the BIMSTEC Maritime Transport Agreement ensures a free, open, secure, and safe Indian Ocean. This is particularly relevant in the wake of the conflict in West Asia, where freedom of navigation is under grave strain, underscoring the importance of open sea lanes and respect for international law.

Despite comprising 22% of the world's population (1.7 billion people) and a combined GDP of nearly US$4 trillion, the Bay of Bengal region's intra-regional trade remains woefully inadequate. New and innovative ways to engage the private sector, encourage micro-trade, regional value chains and trade in local products are needed to give a major fillip to regional trade. Trade facilitation to promote regional value chains in agriculture and related sectors can also give a major boost to regional trade, pending the finalisation of an FTA.

The adoption of the BIMSTEC Masterplan for Transport Connectivity is another important step towards building land, marine, energy, digital and people-to-people connectivity. Rapid and expeditious implementation of this Plan will help integrate waterways, rail, road and digital connectivity.

The Bay of Bengal region is highly vulnerable to cyclones, rising sea levels and other natural disasters. This is an existential reality. Collective cooperation to address climate change, disaster management, the preservation of both Himalayan and marine ecology, and their sustainable development is crucial and necessitates urgent collective action.

Addressing climate change and disaster management enhances security as much as it supports prosperity and connectivity. These are interconnected. Establishing a consultative mechanism among the NSAs and Home Ministers is an important step towards addressing the Bay of Bengal's common security challenges, including combating cybercrime, addressing cybersecurity threats, terrorism, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, as well as other traditional and non-traditional security threats.

For India, regional cooperation within the BIMSTEC framework represents a combination of its Neighbourhood First, Act East and MAHASAGAR policies. As the largest country in the region and one of the fastest-growing larger economies, India recognises its greater responsibility and is prepared to play that role. India has taken several initiatives since the inception of BIMSTEC.

The most recent include: the establishment of the Energy Centre in Bengaluru to explore an energy grid connection across the region; an offer to share its experience with Digital Public Infrastructure to enhance good governance, transparency, and financial inclusion in the delivery of public goods; a proposed connectivity between India's Unified Payments Interface and the payment systems of BIMSTEC member states, to bring substantial benefits across trade, industry, and tourism, enhancing economic activity at all levels; a proposed establishment of a BIMSTEC Chamber of Commerce for greater collaboration among the business communities and annual BIMSTEC Business Summits to foster greater economic engagement; possible trade in local currencies within the BIMSTEC region; the establishment of a Sustainable Maritime Transport Centre to focus on capacity building, research, and innovation, foster greater coordination in maritime policy, and enhance cooperation in maritime security across the region; the establishment of a BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence for Disaster Management in India to facilitate cooperation in disaster preparedness, relief, rehabilitation, and joint exercises among the BIMSTEC Disaster Management Authorities; an offer of training and capacity building in cancer care across BIMSTEC countries and the establishment of a Centre of Excellence to promote research and dissemination of traditional medicines; the establishment of another Centre of Excellence, focused on the exchange of knowledge and best practices, research collaboration, and capacity building in the agriculture sector; and an offer to share Indian expertise and experience in the area of space, including the establishment of a ground station for manpower training, development, and the launch of nano-satellites, and the use of remote sensing data for the BIMSTEC countries.

In addition to these initiatives, India has undertaken several training and capacity-building programmes to equip youth and develop human resources. Sports and cultural connectivity are

other areas of cooperation offered by India to promote people-to-people contacts, including the BIMSTEC Games, a Music Festival, a Youth Leaders' Summit, a Hackathon, and the Young Professional Visitors Programme, all of which encourage innovation and collaboration.

From India's perspective, cooperation in the Bay of Bengal, whether bilateral, sub-regional, or through established ASEAN and BIMSTEC mechanisms, embodies the spirit of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Prayas". This was emphasised by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok on April 4, 2025, when he said: "BIMSTEC serves as a vital bridge between South and Southeast Asia and is emerging as a powerful platform for advancing regional connectivity, cooperation, and shared prosperity…. For us, BIMSTEC is not merely a regional organisation. It is a model for inclusive development and collective security. It stands as a testament to our shared commitments and the strength of our unity."

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Navigating the New Maritime Order: Strategic Imperatives for Collective Governance in the Indian Ocean

Kimlong Chheng*

Maritime security, the blue economy, and maritime law have recently attracted significant attention due to the weakening of the once-upheld international system and the intensification of geopolitical rivalries among great and major powers. The growing divisions and rising multipolarity have indicated the decline of Western powers, most notably as the global power shift has veered towards Asia. For instance, the rise of China, the advent of India's rise, and the simultaneous prosperity of the Global South, which represents up to 85 per cent of the global population, coupled with advances in science and technology, namely Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digitalisation, and unprecedented changes in global climate patterns observed across the continents. These developments have perpetuated a structural shift in human interactions and state-to-state interdependence. Moreover, the digital economy, cybersecurity, and the global arms race, augmented by science and technology, are shaping international relations and national security, and thus, the domains of maritime security and ocean governance must evolve and adapt to these changing environments.

The Indian Ocean should not be treated as a separate case, diagnosed merely as a vast international body of marine ecosystems with immense economic potential or as a sustainable public good for all, without serious consideration of its consequences. In fact, it offers far-reaching benefits to humanity, serving as a pulse that helps secure life energy by both injecting and retrieving abundant resources from the ocean. Simply put, life on Earth has been enriched by the Indian Ocean's sustainability, richness, and ecological health, compared with the rest of the oceans and the world's inland resources.

Democratisation of the Indian Ocean may enhance seamless convergence and integration. However, it does not guarantee that this will work in favour of shared economic prosperity. It thus requires bold courage from political leaders in the Indo-Pacific region to address economic inequality and settle differences in institutional and legal structures to bridge development gaps among countries in the Indian Ocean. India can deepen its strategic posture in free trade and freedom of navigation, supported by the international rule of law. The 1982 UNCLOS provides the most important legal foundation for member states to address differences over maritime boundaries, but it is by no means the single most important international instrument for addressing all issues in the oceanic or maritime spheres. This is owing to the multiple layers of complexity in disputes over claim areas and the

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geopolitical complications of security matters, sovereign rights over marine resources, freedom of navigation, and ownership status.

For India-ASEAN relations, the two parties are natural partners, linked by the vast Indian and Pacific Oceans. In this regard, the trinity of East Asia, namely China, Japan and Korea (CJK), is also a natural partners to ASEAN, and they have close and deep economic, security, and socio-cultural relations with the 11-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The challenges for India, CJK and others, such as Australia and New Zealand, in the Asia-Pacific region are to strike the geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-security balances with each ASEAN member state and with ASEAN as a regional bloc, while weathering external pressure from the West, with the US and the European Union as dynamic "dialogue partners".

As ASEAN remains weak, or is weakened by its vast geography and marked diversity in political culture and legal structures, the India-ASEAN dichotomy highlights fundamental challenges ahead. Take Cambodia as an example. Cambodia is the member state that has ratified the convention. After more than four decades since acceding to the UNCLOS in 1983, Cambodia ratified the convention to join the international community of 172 parties in upholding the international rule of law, with the United Nations Charter at its core and the ASEAN Charter that underpins ASEAN Centrality and its community vision 2045. Some ASEAN member states are partnering with India in BIMSTEC, which aims to position itself as an important forum for enhancing regional connectivity, promoting economic integration, and maintaining geopolitical balance. Currently, BIMSTEC includes two ASEAN member states, namely Myanmar and Thailand.[1] This arrangement appears to disregard other ASEAN maritime member states in its aforementioned overarching goals.

In this context, it serves the best interests of maritime nations to ensure coherence to streamline and harmonise strategic interests in the maritime domain, without creating unnecessary confrontation, while preserving the national interests of the respective member states in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. Therefore, consolidating the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative (FOIP), the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, China's 21st-century maritime silk road supported by China's recently launched four global initiatives, and the UN-led pact of the future 2024.

Co-stewardship of the Indian Ocean matters for several reasons. In what follows, this article will present the rationale for collective governance of the Indian Ocean in the 21st century and beyond.

First, the diversity of maritime states in the Indian Ocean calls for our close examination of their capacities, interests, and leadership in navigating common challenges on the one hand and harnessing collective strengths on the other. The Carnegie Endowment Organisation listed the Indian Ocean as bordered by over 25 littoral and island nations across Africa, Asia, and Australia, and noted that it serves as a critical global trade route. Major countries include India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Australia, South Africa, Kenya, and Oman. Key island nations include Madagascar, the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, and Sri Lanka.[2] By all means, the international governance

of maritime security cannot rest solely with the great powers. Moreover, they are not designed for sole leadership at the expense of the rest of the oceanic and maritime states.

Second, technological divides persist among countries in the Indian Ocean. In the technology sector, India has seen exponential growth and innovation, which can be leveraged to support security initiatives in the region. As the Indian economy is picking up, projected to become the world's third-largest economy by 2028-2030, overtaking Germany, it holds the key to injecting new impetus for economic development, peace and international cooperation. Within the next decade, India will reach a high level of confidence that its economy will be opened up and that domestic consumption will expand. This economic maturing will be offset by the cost of security protection, particularly in the maritime domains. India's regional leadership in development contributions and security guarantees will serve as a springboard to promote Indian soft power and cushion the external shocks India will need to address.

Third, the trilateral partnership between ASEAN, India and Japan (AIJ) in maritime security governance of the Indo-Pacific region, in its pragmatic relations with other regional actors in the wider Asia-Pacific community of countries, including South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East and Europe, will necessitate a security anchor for regional production and supply chains for critical minerals and resources, energy security, and economic security. Through the shared principles and pragmatic engagement of the trilateral partnership, it entails both the responsibility and the capacity to sustain and revitalise the rules-based order in the evolving Indo-Pacific.[3]

In conclusion, securitising maritime governance is risky. Conversely, synergising the major, middle and small powers in the Global South, particularly maritime states, on the basis of the international rule of law, leadership, and the international responsibility to contribute to regional peace, security and development is key to achieving pragmatic outcomes. Collective governance of maritime security and the marine economy, and the internationalisation of best practices, should be enhanced. In a nutshell, overcoming geopolitical distrust and hegemonic motives among maritime member states, and creating a model of productive partnership among key players, i.e., by means of inclusiveness and coherence on the basis of the international rule of law, is an essential step to exemplify and reinvigorate the global multilateralism that results from trust, respect, justice, equality and mutual interest.

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Navigating the Indian Ocean: Security, Strategy, and Cooperative Governance

Adluri Subramanyam Raju*

Oceans cover nearly three-quarters of the Earth's surface and remain central to global economic and social life. A significant proportion (75 per cent) of the world's population lives in coastal areas (within 200nm), and the vast majority of global trade by volume and value travels by sea. Maritime space serves multiple roles: as a resource base, a transport medium, a domain of sovereignty, and an information conduit. These functions, however, are increasingly strained by challenges on land and at sea. As these pressures intensify, the need for cooperative maritime governance becomes more urgent.

Governance at sea safeguards maritime frontiers, ports, and offshore areas; establishes an EEZ to protect marine ecosystems, lives, and property; protects sea lines of communication; and prevents smuggling, poaching, piracy, gun-running, and trafficking. A 'Crisis of the Oceans' was caused by pollution, jurisdictional disputes, over-exploitation, and widespread ignorance.[1] Two-thirds of the world's population lives within 100 kilometres of the coast, and the situation is expected to worsen with population growth and coastal urbanisation.[2]

Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean basin, the third-largest ocean basin in the world, covers more than 75 million square kilometres and has a total coastline of 70,000 km. It is home to about 39 countries, which together account for 35 per cent of the world's population and 40 per cent of the world's coastline. Almost eighty per cent of the world's sea trade and two-thirds of the world's oil trade pass through the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is at the centre of global trade, with crucial chokepoints such as the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz. The sea routes connect West Asia, Africa, and East Asia with Europe and the Americas. About 40 per cent of the world's offshore oil production comes from the Indian Ocean basin.[3] At the same time, the region is increasingly vulnerable to a complex spectrum of traditional and non-traditional security threats, ranging from piracy, armed robbery, and maritime terrorism to other forms of illicit maritime activity. Ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean, therefore, is not only vital for safeguarding International Shipping Lanes and Sea Lines of Communication but also for maintaining regional stability and sustaining the broader architecture of global economic interdependence.

At the same time, maritime security in the Indian Ocean is increasingly shaped by great power competition, adding a strategic and military dimension to what was traditionally viewed as a space of commerce and connectivity. The growing presence of major powers has intensified geopolitical rivalries, particularly over control of

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critical sea lanes, chokepoints, and maritime infrastructure. The expanding footprint of China – through port development, logistics networks, and dual-use facilities (also known as Strategic Strong Points) across the Indian Ocean littoral – has raised concerns about strategic encirclement and long-term military access.

India's maritime approach is increasingly articulated through its policy statement, encapsulated in the acronym MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), which builds on the earlier SAGAR policy. MAHASAGAR reflects an integrated approach to maritime security that combines economic development, regional connectivity, environmental sustainability, and cooperative security. It positions India as a provider of security while emphasising inclusivity and partnership rather than confrontation.

This evolving strategic environment has led to the gradual militarisation of the Indian Ocean, evident in increased naval deployments, joint exercises, and the establishment or expansion of overseas bases and access agreements. While these developments may contribute to deterrence and stability, they also heighten the risk of strategic mistrust, competition for influence, and the securitisation of maritime spaces vital to global commerce. Consequently, maritime security in the Indian Ocean must now be understood not only in terms of non-traditional threats but also within the broader context of shifting power dynamics and geopolitical contestation. The following are a few challenges that can be seen as maritime threats in the region.

Environmental Challenges and Climate Change

Environmental issues are a primary concern for most countries in the Indian Ocean region. In the long run, environmental degradation will have serious implications not only for marine ecology but also for the livelihoods of fishing communities. Apart from overfishing, factors such as coral reef degradation due to climate change, ship emissions, and land-based pollution significantly affect fish stocks. Mangroves – essential for coastal protection and biodiversity – are being destroyed by reduced freshwater inflows and human encroachment. Rising sea levels and climate variability will further exacerbate vulnerabilities, potentially displacing around 250 million people globally by 2050.

Humanity will face numerous problems (rising sea levels, migration of people living in low-lying areas, environmental hazards, cyclones, droughts, impacts on health, reduced crop yields, water scarcity, and so on) due to greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change poses multiple challenges for island states in the Indian Ocean. With changes in temperature, precipitation, and humidity, the main sectors, such as agriculture and rural development, will likely be severely affected. The impact can already be seen in heatwaves, cyclones, floods, and the salinisation of coastal waters, as well as in their effects on agriculture, fisheries, and health. A rise in sea levels would result in the gradual submergence of coastal states. As a result, large-scale migration from coastal zones is anticipated. This will create many environmental refugees, mainly from low-lying regions. Seawater intrusion into groundwater and

temperature changes can reduce agricultural and fishing incomes in coastal states.

Maritime Domain Awareness and Governance Gaps

A critical challenge in addressing maritime threats in the Indian Ocean is the lack of comprehensive Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) – the effective understanding of activities at sea that could affect security, safety, the economy, or the environment. The vastness of the ocean, coupled with limited technological and institutional capacities among many littoral States, creates significant blind spots in monitoring maritime activity.

The MDA integrates data from multiple sources, including coastal radar systems, satellite surveillance, automatic identification systems, and intelligence-sharing networks. However, disparities in technological capabilities across the region lead to uneven surveillance coverage, allowing illicit activities such as piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing to persist.

Strengthening MDA requires not only technological investment but also enhanced regional cooperation. Information-sharing mechanisms, joint patrols, and coordinated surveillance initiatives are essential for bridging existing gaps. Regional frameworks and partnerships can facilitate capacity-building, enabling smaller states to monitor their exclusive economic zones more effectively. In this regard, collaborative approaches involving both regional and extra-regional actors can significantly enhance situational awareness and maritime governance.

In this regard, India has taken a proactive role by establishing the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). The IFC-IOR serves as a regional hub for maritime information sharing, integrating data from multiple sources, including coastal radar systems, satellites, and partner countries. It enables real-time monitoring of shipping movements and enhances situational awareness across the Indian Ocean.

By collaborating with partner nations and multinational agencies, IFC-IOR addresses critical gaps in surveillance and coordination. It is a practical implementation of India's MAHSAGAR vision, promoting transparency, trust-building, and collective security. Strengthening these mechanisms is essential to effectively counter piracy, trafficking, and other illicit activities.

Critical Maritime Infrastructure and Vulnerabilities

The security of critical maritime infrastructure has become a central concern across the Indian Ocean. This includes ports, offshore energy installations, shipping lanes, and submarine communication cables. These assets underpin the global economy and are indispensable for trade, energy security, and digital connectivity.

Submarine cables, in particular, carry the vast majority of global internet and data traffic, making them highly strategic yet vulnerable assets. Disruptions – whether from natural hazards, accidents, or deliberate sabotage – can have far-reaching economic and security consequences. Similarly, major ports and energy infrastructure are increasingly targeted by both physical and cyber threats.

The growing digitisation of maritime logistics and port operations has introduced new

vulnerabilities, particularly in the cyber domain. Cyberattacks on port infrastructure, navigation systems, or shipping networks can disrupt global supply chains and undermine economic stability. In a region as critical as the Indian Ocean, such disruptions could have cascading global effects.

Protecting critical maritime infrastructure therefore requires a multi-layered approach that combines physical security, cybersecurity measures, regulatory frameworks, and international cooperation. Ensuring resilience in these systems is essential to maintaining the stability and reliability of global maritime networks.

Non-state Actors

Due to the vastness of the oceans, unhindered access, the absence of national jurisdiction on the high seas, and the limited maritime capabilities of most nations in the Indian Ocean region, non-state actors are operating without detection by security agencies. Coastal states can address maritime threats by sharing their experiences, collaboratively analysing the current situation, and assessing future scenarios and prospects for human development.

Piracy and Transnational Crime

The persistence of piracy[4], particularly in the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa, remains a major concern. The Flag of Convenience (FOC) facility is offered by 30 small states, and nearly 50 per cent of global shipping is registered under such arrangements. This complicates regulation.[5] According to World Bank estimates, piracy costs the global economy approximately US$18 billion annually.[6]

Maritime trade has been affected by the resurgence in piracy and naval theft since the beginning of the 1990s.[7] It depends on the security of routes and passages. This explains the growing number of projects, i.e., the opening of new communication channels, which may alter the geopolitics of world maritime transport. Conventional merchant ships carry heroin and opium from the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand) to Europe via major ports such as Karachi, Mumbai, Dubai, and Istanbul. Drugs also travel through the Golden Crescent (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran) to the West and the Far East. Drugs worth US$500 billion a year are being transported, which is larger than the global oil trade.[8]

Illegal fishing has long been a problem in the region and has been linked to the rise of piracy off Somalia's coast. It has been estimated that unregulated Iranian fishing vessels catch up to 100,000 metric tonnes of fish from Somali waters each year.[9] The Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources of the Federal Government of Somalia, Abdilahi Bidhan Warsame, said, "It is very concerning to see that foreign fleets are not prepared to go through the legitimate channels to gain access to fish in Somalia. We call on all distant water fishing nations to ensure they control their flagged vessels and respect our management regime."

[10] Due to ineffective policy, "a generation that did not find education, that did not find employment, that did not find a way to learn the good traditions and customs of the Somali people. Hunger, poverty, and refugees all impacted the new generation that has grown since... In the absence of the responsibility of a government, many young people who should have been on the path to a good and bright future were neglected.[11]"

The overexploitation of fisheries by both international commercial and illegal foreign fishing has marginalised Somali fishers. The fishers need more infrastructure and technology to maximise their catch. Many of these fishers were previously farmers who had to switch to fishing to survive. Due to the depletion of local fish stocks and the presence of foreign trawlers, half of Somalia's population has become poor.[12] Somali pirates justify their activities by claiming that they protect Somalia's natural resources and that payment should be considered legitimate taxation—necessary steps to address their problems, particularly the eradication of poverty in ungoverned areas. Pirates attack from the shore in motorboats, and most attacks are carried out under cover of darkness. It is also easy to attack at anchorage, when the crew is preparing for upcoming cargo operations. Maritime pirates are increasingly exploiting the world's ungoverned spaces with growing success. The pirates of today could become terrorists of tomorrow.[13]

Maritime Terrorism

After the Cold War, maritime terrorism took on a transnational dimension, making it difficult for states to curb such activities. Hence, this evil must be fought collectively by all states. As threats from the sea increase, littoral states need to enhance their cooperation on maritime security. The rise of maritime terrorism disrupts peace and stability at sea. Ships and other vessels can themselves become 'tools of terror'.

The growing commercial activity at sea makes it the preferred route for terrorist elements such as Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and other groups that have carried out a series of incidents by using the sea route to attack targets. The Mumbai (India) attack has only reiterated the urgency for the navy to fight against terrorist activities. LeT sought to conduct its activities at sea and established its 'sea wing.' It is believed that the Indian Ocean region has a large number of merchant vessels belonging to various terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda. One cannot ignore the possibility of a nexus between pirates and terrorists in the maritime domain.

Conclusion

Maritime security in the Indian Ocean is increasingly shaped by the intersection of traditional and non-traditional threats and by intensifying great-power competition. Environmental challenges, technological vulnerabilities, and governance gaps further complicate the security landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, cooperative approach involving regional and extra-regional actors. Enhancing maritime domain awareness, securing critical infrastructure, and managing geopolitical competition are essential to a stable maritime order. The future of the Indian Ocean will depend on states' ability to balance competition with cooperation, ensuring that this vital maritime space continues to serve as a conduit for global prosperity rather than a zone of conflict.

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The Indian Ocean: From Maritime Commons to a Contested Geopolitical Theatre

PK Roy*

Introduction

The Indian Ocean, long considered a benign maritime expanse facilitating commerce, cultural exchange, and connectivity, has undergone an unprecedented geopolitical transformation in the 21st century. Historically a bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe, it is now emerging as an arena of geopolitical contestation - marked by strategic competition, expanding naval activity, and rising non-traditional security challenges.[1] This transition - from a relatively open and cooperative maritime domain to a strategically contested theatre - mirrors the broader reordering of global power dynamics.[2]

From an ancient and busy trade network dominated by Indian and Arab traders, later shaped by European colonial powers such as the Portuguese and British, the Indian Ocean evolved into a peripheral Cold War theatre influenced by US-Soviet rivalry. In the contemporary era, however, it has gained unprecedented importance as the geopolitical centre of gravity shifts towards the Indo-Pacific. Today, it is marked by intensifying competition, particularly between India and China, within a broader framework of great-power rivalry.[3]

At the heart of this transformation is the growing importance and centrality of maritime domains in global geopolitics. The rapid pace of globalisation, the rise of Asia as an economic powerhouse, and the increasing dependence of modern economies on secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) have elevated the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to unprecedented strategic significance.[4] At the same time, renewed major power competition, particularly between the United States and China, has introduced tension into a region that traditionally thrived on cooperation rather than conflict.

This article examines the transformation of the Indian Ocean from a historical transit zone into a contested geopolitical space. It traces the region's historical evolution, analyses the contemporary drivers of strategic competition, evaluates India's maritime trajectory, situates the IOR within the Indo-Pacific construct, and assesses emerging geopolitical disruptions. It argues that India must move beyond reactive postures and assume a proactive leadership role in shaping a stable and inclusive regional order.

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The Indian Ocean as a Historical Zone of Connectivity

The Indian Ocean has historically functioned more as a route for exchange than as a zone of conflict. Geographically, it links the eastern coast of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia, forming one of the oldest maritime networks in human history. For centuries, the region was marked by active economic and cultural interaction. The monsoon wind system enabled predictable seasonal navigation, facilitating long-distance maritime trade. Merchants from India, Arabia, and Southeast Asia developed extensive trading networks that carried goods such as spices, textiles, and precious metals, while also spreading ideas, religions, and technologies.[5]

Unlike the Mediterranean or the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean did not witness prolonged naval conflict among regional powers. Instead, it served as a "shared maritime space," where economic interdependence took precedence over dominance.[6] Indian merchants, Arab traders, and Southeast Asian states coexisted in a largely cooperative environment, guided by shared commercial interests.

The arrival of European powers in the late 15th century marked a major turning point. The Portuguese sought to monopolise trade routes by force, followed by the Dutch, French, and British, who established fortified trading posts and naval bases.[7] Over time, the British Empire consolidated control over key maritime nodes, integrating the Indian Ocean into a wider global imperial system. Despite this phase of imperial competition, the Indian Ocean remained primarily focussed on trade rather than becoming a fully militarised theatre. During the Cold War, it gained strategic relevance but remained secondary to the Atlantic and Pacific. The United States established a major base on Diego Garcia, while the Soviet Union maintained a limited naval presence.[8] The post-Cold War period, however, marked a clear turning point. The collapse of bipolarity, the rise of globalisation, and the growing importance of energy security transformed the Indian Ocean into a region of increasing geopolitical significance.

Strategic and Economic Transformation in the 21st Century

In the contemporary era, the Indian Ocean has become a vital route for global trade and energy flows. Approximately 80 per cent of global seaborne oil trade passes through it, while nearly half of global container traffic transits its waters.[9] The region's chokepoints – the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca - are crucial to global economic stability. The Strait of Hormuz alone carries a significant share of global oil exports, while Malacca is the main link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.[10] Any disruption at these chokepoints would have cascading effects on global trade and energy security.

Beyond energy flows, the Indian Ocean has become increasingly important in the digital age. Undersea communication cables, which carry over 95 per cent of global data, pass through the region, making maritime security essential not only for trade but also for the functioning of the global digital economy.[11] The convergence of economic, technological, and strategic interests has made the Indian Ocean a zone of growing vulnerability and

competition. Major powers are increasingly seeking to secure influence over critical maritime routes, ports, and infrastructure. As a result, the Indian Ocean has shifted from a passive transit corridor to an active strategic domain where economic and military interests closely intersect.

India's Maritime Trajectory: From Maritime Legacy to Continental Fixation

India's geographic centrality in the Indian Ocean confers inherent strategic advantages. Its long coastline, proximity to major SLOCs, and island territories, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, provide strong leverage in shaping regional dynamics. Historically, India had a strong maritime tradition. The Chola Empire's naval expeditions into Southeast Asia reflect early manifestations of sea power and maritime influence.[12] Indian traders and cultural networks extended across the Indian Ocean, contributing to its interconnected character. However, post-independence India experienced a strategic shift towards continental priorities. The trauma of Partition, wars with Pakistan and China, and internal demands for nation-building led to a largely continental-centric security outlook. Maritime strategy received limited attention, and naval modernisation progressed slowly.

This land-centric approach had several consequences. First, India underutilised its island territories, particularly the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which hold immense strategic value near the Malacca Strait. Second, defence resource allocation was largely directed towards land forces, limiting naval expansion. Third, India's limited maritime engagement created space for external actors, especially China, to expand their presence in the region.

It was only in the early 21st century that India began reassessing its maritime outlook. The Indian Maritime Doctrine (2004) and subsequent strategies reflected a growing recognition of the importance of sea power.[13] The articulation of the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision further underscored India's commitment to regional security and cooperation. However, this renewed maritime focus is unfolding in a far more competitive and contested environment than before.

The Indo-Pacific Construct and the Rise of Strategic Competition

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept marks a major shift in geopolitical thinking. By linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans into a single continuum, the Indo-Pacific framework it recognises the interconnected nature of trade, security, and power projection.[14]

The region has become the centre of global economic activity, accounting for a substantial share of global GDP and trade. At the same time, it has emerged as the main arena of strategic competition particularly between the United States and China.

China's rise as a maritime power is a key driver of this transformation. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related port development projects, China has expanded its footprint across the Indian Ocean.[15] While presented as economic initiatives, their dual-use nature has raised concerns regarding long-term military implications. In response, the United States has strengthened its

presence through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. Partnerships such as the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, United States) and AUKUS reflect efforts to balance China's growing influence.

At the same time, the growing militarisation of maritime spaces – evident in expanding naval deployments, surveillance activities, and strategic bases - has intensified competition. Locations such as Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota, and Diego Garcia have become critical nodes in this evolving strategic landscape. Furthermore, the growing involvement of external actors - including Japan, Australia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE - has added complexity to regional dynamics, transforming the Indian Ocean into a multi-layered geopolitical theatre.

Islands as Strategic Anchors in Indian Ocean Geopolitics

The evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean have greatly increased the strategic value of islands, transforming them from peripheral outposts into key centres of power projection, surveillance, and economic influence. Today, control over islands often translates into greater influence over LOCs, chokepoints, and regional security architectures. Islands serve as unsinkable aircraft carriers, enabling continuous surveillance, forward deployment, and rapid response. Their location allows countries to monitor vital sea routes and project power across vast oceanic expanses. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, for instance, overlook the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca - one of the world's busiest and most strategically significant chokepoints. Similarly, Diego Garcia provides the United States with a critical logistical and operational hub in the central Indian Ocean, while France's presence in Réunion and Mayotte extends its strategic reach across the southwestern IOR.[16]

The rising competition among major powers has heightened the importance of island territories. China's expanding footprint through port infrastructure and access arrangements - often described as a "places, not bases" strategy - highlights the dual-use potential of these maritime facilities. Djibouti, which hosts China's first overseas military base alongside bases of other global powers, illustrates how commercial and military interests can overlap. At the same time, Australia's development of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and India's strengthening of infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands reflect a broader trend towards forward presence and dispersed basing.[17]

Beyond their traditional military roles, islands are integral to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) networks. Radar chains, satellite integration, and information-sharing platforms, such as India's Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), rely on island-based infrastructure to enable real-time monitoring. These capabilities are essential for addressing both conventional threats and non-traditional challenges, such as piracy, illegal fishing, and grey-zone operations.[18]

Economically, islands are emerging as hubs of the blue economy, with opportunities in fisheries, seabed resources, tourism, and maritime logistics. Their extensive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) provide access to valuable marine resources,

further increasing their strategic significance. However, this growing importance also brings challenges. Many island ecosystems are ecologically fragile and vulnerable to climate change, rising sea levels, and environmental degradation. Additionally, issues related to indigenous rights and sustainable development – especially in regions such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Chagos Archipelago – require careful and balanced handling.[19] [20] In this context, islands are no longer on the margins of Indian Ocean geopolitics; they are central to it. For India, harnessing the strategic potential of its island territories - while ensuring sustainability and regional cooperation - will be key to shaping the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.

The Trump Factor and Strategic Uncertainty

Recent developments in U.S. foreign policy – especially under Donald Trump's leadership - have introduced unpredictability into the global strategic environment. Trump's focus on economic nationalism, manifested through tariffs and trade wars, disrupted global supply chains and weakened multilateral frameworks.[21] His transactional approach to alliances also raised concerns about the reliability of U.S. commitments, prompting many partners to reassess their strategic dependence. In the Indo-Pacific, this led to a degree of strategic uncertainty. While the United States continued to emphasise the region's importance, inconsistencies in policy implementation created uncertainty about its long-term commitments.

In the Indian Ocean, these trends have had notable effects. The perception of reduced U.S. strategic coherence has enabled other powers, particularly China, to expand their presence and influence. At the same time, regional countries have adopted hedging strategies, seeking to balance relationships with multiple powers. For India, this evolving landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. While the diffusion of power creates space for greater strategic autonomy, it also requires careful navigation of competing interests.

The Emergence of a Multipolar Maritime Order

The Indian Ocean today is characterised by an emerging multipolar order. Unlike the bipolar structure of the Cold War or the unipolar moment that followed, the current environment features multiple influential actors with overlapping interests. China's expanding maritime presence is a defining feature of this order. Its investments in port infrastructure, growing naval capabilities, and the establishment of a permanent base in Djibouti point to long-term strategic ambitions.[22]

The United States continues to maintain a strong presence, but its dominance is increasingly contested. At the same time, regional powers such as India, Japan, and Australia are playing more active roles, contributing to a more balanced and distributed power structure. Smaller littoral states have also gained strategic importance. Their strategic geographic locations and control over maritime zones allow them to leverage competition among major powers for economic and security benefits. This has led to a more complex, multi-centred security architecture with overlapping institutions and shifting alignments.

At the same time, non-traditional security challenges - including piracy, maritime terrorism, illegal fishing, cyber threats, and climate change - have added further complexity. Addressing these challenges requires cooperative approaches that transcend traditional power politics. The 2025 Chagos Archipelago agreement, which involves the transfer of sovereignty to Mauritius while retaining Western military access, highlights the intersection of legal, historical, and strategic considerations in the region.[23]

India's Imperative to Lead

India's centrality to the Indian Ocean places it in a unique position to shape the region's future. Its geographic location, together with its growing economic and military capabilities, provides a strong foundation for leadership. India has consistently adopted an inclusive approach, focusing on cooperation, capacity-building, and regional stability. Its role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations – especially during the 2004 tsunami - has reinforced its reputation as a "net security provider."[24]

Institutional initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the IFC-IOR reflect India's commitment to cooperative security frameworks. Engagement through IORA and partnerships such as the Quad further reinforce India's regional role. However, leadership requires more than capability – it demands strategic vision, sustained investment, and consistent policy. India must balance its continental and maritime priorities while deepening partnerships and strengthening institutions.

Strategic Imperatives for India

To effectively shape the emerging order, India must pursue a comprehensive maritime strategy across key areas:

1. Capability Development

India must continue to modernise its navy, with a focus on carrier battle groups, submarines, and advanced surveillance systems. The plan to expand its navy to over 200 warships and submarines by 2035 signals a clear intent to strengthen its presence at sea. The Indian Navy's Maritime Security Strategy, released in April 2026, focuses on multi-domain integration (land, sea, air, cyber, space) and on preparing for grey-zone warfare. Key infrastructure projects, such as the Chabahar Port and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands expansion, are being accelerated to bolster strategic presence.

2. Island Development

India must prioritise the integrated development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) serving as a vital forward operating base to enhance surveillance and maintain control over critical maritime chokepoints, particularly the approaches to the Malacca Strait. Positioned at the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific, the ANI–ANC complex has the potential to anchor India's maritime strategy and enable a decisive shift away from its historically continental orientation.

Developing these islands into the strategic and economic fulcrum of India's Act East policy is not merely desirable but imperative to sustain regional influence. This requires an integrated approach that harmonises military capability with economic development, ecological sustainability, and

cooperative regional engagement. By aligning security needs with development and sustainability, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands can become a key pillar of India's Indo-Pacific vision and maritime leadership.

Currently, India is accelerating the development of its key island territories - Andaman & Nicobar on the eastern seaboard and Lakshadweep in the west - while deepening cooperation with partner nations such as Seychelles and Mauritius. This includes an emphasis on dual-use infrastructure, encompassing port development and enhanced naval surveillance capabilities.

3. Regional Partnerships

India must continue to strengthen both bilateral and multilateral partnerships to enhance collective security and improve interoperability across the Indo-Pacific. By reinforcing frameworks such as the Quad and engagements with ASEAN, alongside strategic partnerships with countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia, India can play a pivotal role in advancing a free, open, and rules-based regional order. These partnerships should focus on maritime security, defence technology cooperation, and joint operations to enable a coordinated response to evolving regional challenges and to reinforce stability across the Indo-Pacific.

4. Maritime Governance

India must take a leading role in shaping maritime norms and in supporting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. It should actively promote freedom of navigation and ensure adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This requires strengthening maritime domain awareness, advancing cooperative security frameworks, and building consensus among regional partners. Through these efforts, India can effectively counter coercive practices and help maintain stability and openness across the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.

5. Economic Integration

India must continue to leverage the blue economy by aligning its maritime strategy with national economic policy to enhance regional influence and sustain long-term growth. With the blue economy contributing approximately 4% to GDP and supporting nearly 95% of India's trade by volume, its strategic significance is undeniable. This integration should prioritise initiatives such as the Deep Ocean Mission, accelerate port-led industrialisation under Sagarmala, and promote sustainable fisheries through the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY). At the same time, ensuring a secure maritime environment will be essential to fully realise this potential.

6. Technological Investment

India must continue to invest in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), cybersecurity, and the protection of undersea infrastructure, all of which are vital to the digital economy and broader geopolitical interests. With nearly 95% of global data transmitted via subsea cables, safeguarding this infrastructure has become a strategic priority. Strengthening platforms such as the IFC-IOR will enhance real-time situational awareness and coordination. These efforts are essential to counter emerging threats, including subsea sabotage, grey-zone operations, and surveillance, while securing the foundations of a growing blue economy.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Indian Ocean from a historical maritime commons into a contested geopolitical space reflects broader 21st-century shifts. As global power increasingly focuses on the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Ocean has emerged as the strategic core of global geopolitics. For India, this transformation marks a defining moment. India's geographic centrality, historical legacy, and expanding capabilities position it as a natural leader. However, leadership will depend on the ability to translate potential into sustained strategic action. In this evolving landscape, India must not merely adapt—it must lead.

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