6. Indian Ocean Region - International Relation

India committed to the idea of oceans remaining open, stable and rules-based- President Droupadi Murmu. India emphasizes the strategic necessity of an "open, stable, and rules-based" Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to counter rising security threats and foreign naval expansion. As a net security provider, India is leveraging initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and naval modernization to secure critical trade routes and energy lifelines.

Geography of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

Extent- The Indian Ocean covers approximately one-fifth of the world's total ocean area.

Boundaries- North- Iran, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. East- Malay Peninsula, Sunda Islands (Indonesia), and Australia. South- Southern Ocean. West- Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Demographics-

Member Countries- The region comprises 36 countries.

Population- Home to approximately 2.5 billion people, accounting for 35% of the global population.

Coastline- Represents 40% of the world's coastline.

Significance of the IOR

Geostrategic Importance

Global Link- As the third-largest ocean, it acts as a critical bridge between the East and the West. It is a central theatre for power competition among major global players (India, China, U.S.).

Maritime Chokepoints- The region hosts strategic narrow passages essential for global shipping. Control over these points equals control over global trade flows-

Strait of Hormuz (Exit for Persian Gulf oil).

Bab-el-Mandeb (Red Sea/Suez Canal route).

Malacca Strait (Key link to the Pacific).

Lombok Strait (Indonesia).

Economic Significance

Trade Volume- The region handles nearly 50% of global container traffic.

Oil Trade- It facilitates 80% of the world's seaborne oil trade.

Blue Economy- It is a major hub for ocean-based economic activities including shipping, fisheries, seabed mining, and tourism.

Energy Security

Energy Lifeline- It is the primary transit route for oil and gas moving from West Asia to major consumption hubs in East Asia.

Import Dependency- Major economies like India, China, Japan, and South Korea rely heavily on energy imports through these waters, making regional stability vital for their economic survival.

Resource Potential

Fisheries- The Indian Ocean supports approximately 15% of the world's total fish catch.

Food Security- The fishing industry provides critical employment and nutrition for millions of people across the littoral states.

Untapped Frontier- The region holds significant potential for sustainable ocean-based economic development (minerals, renewables).

Drivers of Increased Focus on IOR

Driver	**Details**
Rise of New Economies	The economic emergence of India and China has revived ancient trade networks, making the IOR a new global economic growth centre.
Maritime Security Threats	Issues like piracy (e.g., near Somalia) necessitated international coop-eration to secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).
Indo-Pacific Construct	The strategic merging of the Indian and Pacific Oceans highlights the IOR's centrality in the new global maritime order and diplomacy.
Global Order	Control over the IOR influences global trade flows, energy security, and military logistics.

Major Challenges in the Region

Expansion of Foreign Naval Power

Increased Presence- There has been a rapid increase in the number and duration of foreign naval vessel deployments (specifically Chinese) in the region.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)- Deployment of "research and survey vessels" to gather sensitive oceanographic and marine data under the guise of scientific research.

Strategic Port Development- Development of ports and infrastructure in littoral states (e.g., near India's maritime boundaries) raises concerns about dual-use capabilities and strategic encirclement.

Non-Traditional Threats

Piracy- Persistent hotspots near the Horn of Africa and the Malacca Strait threaten commercial shipping.

Trafficking- Porous maritime borders are exploited for arms smuggling and human trafficking.

Terrorism- Non-state actors utilize sea routes for terror-related logistics and attacks.

India's Strategic Stance & Responses

Core Vision

Open and Stable- Commitment to an "open, stable, and rules-based" maritime order.

Special Responsibility- As a central geographic power, India assumes responsibility for securing sea routes, protecting marine resources, and preventing illegal activities.

Stance on Militarization- Militarization of the IOR is viewed as undesirable and detrimental to regional peace. There is strong opposition to the military use of commercial infrastructure funded by foreign entities.

Diplomatic & Security Leadership

First Responder- India positions itself as the primary provider of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster **Relief (HADR)** in times of crisis.

Preferred Partner- Acts as the preferred security partner for smaller island nations, assisting with capacity building and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

Regional Diplomacy- Raising awareness among partners about the long-term security and economic risks (e.g., debt traps) associated with certain foreign infrastructure projects.

Key Initiatives

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)- Focuses on seven pillars including maritime security, ecology, resource sharing, and connectivity.

MAHASAGAR- A regional outreach initiative promoting "Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth for All in the Region."

Naval Modernisation- Prioritizing combat readiness through the commissioning of indigenous warships (e.g., INS Vikrant, INS Visakhapatnam) to enhance power projection and deterrence.

Multilateral Engagements

Organization	**Focus Areas**
IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)	Maritime security, Blue Economy, Disaster Management, Trade facilitation.
IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium)	Navy-led- Information exchange, Joint exercises, HADR cooperation, Anti-piracy.
QUAD (India–US–Japan–Australia)	Strategic- Freedom of navigation, Rules-based order, Maritime security.
Colombo Security Conclave (CSC)	Security-centric- Counter-narcotics, Cyber security, HADR, Illegal fishing.

Conclusion

For India, the IOR is not merely a neighbourhood but a strategic imperative central to its national security, economic growth, and global leadership ambitions. Initiatives such as the Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific Vision, and Blue Economy strategy reinforce India's centrality in the region.

Source- https-//www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/india-committed-to-the-idea-of-oceans-remaining-open-stable-and-rules-based-president-droupadi-murmu/article70354507.ece#google_vignette