

4. 10th Indian Ocean Dialogue – Security

The 10th Indian Ocean Dialogue was held in New Delhi under the theme "Indian Ocean Region in a Transforming World," with India as IORA Chair (2025–27) using the platform to foreground maritime security, blue economy governance, and innovation under its MAHASAGAR vision.

1. Background

The Indian Ocean, covering approximately 70 million square kilometres and bordered by 38 countries, constitutes one of the world's most strategically significant maritime spaces facilitating over 80% of global seaborne oil trade, 25% of maritime oil commerce, and serving as the primary maritime corridor connecting energy-rich Gulf nations with Asian manufacturing powerhouses and Western consumer markets. For India, the Indian Ocean holds existential importance with over 90% of trade by volume and 85% of crude oil imports moving through these waters, while approximately 30–35% of total merchandise exports are shipped through the Red Sea-Suez Canal corridor toward European and North American markets. The Indian Ocean Rim Association, formed on March 7, 1997, originated from late South African President Nelson Mandela's vision during his 1995 India visit, initially known as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative before becoming IOR-ARC and finally IORA, with its Secretariat based in Ebène, Mauritius. IORA currently comprises 23 Member States and 12 Dialogue Partners, with its apex decision-making body being the Council of Ministers meeting annually.

The association's significance for India has grown exponentially as China expands its Indian Ocean presence through Belt and Road Initiative ports in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti, creates naval bases, and deploys submarines and warships under anti-piracy operations that potentially serve surveillance and power projection purposes. India's SAGAR doctrine (2015) and successor MAHASAGAR vision (2025) position India as the preferred security partner and first responder, with IORA providing legitimate multilateral institutional home for this leadership role. The 10th Indian Ocean Dialogue gained urgency amid escalating West Asian conflict, disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz affecting energy security, and the March 2026 sinking of Iranian frigate IRIS Dena near Sri Lanka highlighting maritime security vulnerabilities requiring coordinated regional responses.

2. Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

Formation and Structure

1. IORA is an intergovernmental organization formed on March 7, 1997, born from Nelson Mandela's vision during his 1995 India visit.
2. Initially known as Indian Ocean Rim Initiative, later Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, before taking its current name.
3. The IORA Secretariat is based in Ebene, Mauritius, headed by a Secretary-General appointed for a fixed term.
4. Its apex decision-making body is the Council of Ministers meeting annually.

Membership

1. IORA currently consists of 23 Member States including Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Pakistan, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tanzania, UAE, and France (representing Réunion).
2. It has 12 Dialogue Partners including China, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States.

Priority Areas

1. IORA focuses on six priority areas – Maritime Safety and Security, Trade and Investment, Fisheries Management, Disaster Risk Management, Academic Science and Technology Cooperation, and Tourism and Cultural Exchange.
2. These areas address interconnected challenges requiring regional cooperation beyond individual state capacities.

Why the Indian Ocean Matters

Trade and Energy Security

1. Over 90% of India's trade by volume and more than 85% of crude oil imports move by sea through the Indian Ocean.
2. The Indian Ocean region facilitates roughly 25% of global maritime oil trade connecting Gulf producers with Asian consumers.
3. Nearly 95% of India's trade by volume and 68% by value moves through maritime routes.
4. Approximately 30–35% of India's total merchandise exports are shipped through the Red Sea–Suez Canal corridor, especially goods destined for Europe, North America, and North Africa.

Strategic Chokepoints

1. Critical maritime chokepoints include the Strait of Hormuz controlling Gulf oil exports, Bab-el-Mandeb connecting Red Sea to Gulf of Aden, Strait of Malacca linking Indian Ocean to Pacific, and Mozambique Channel facilitating East African trade.
2. Disruptions in any chokepoint cascade into global energy and trade crises affecting economies worldwide.

3. Significance of IORA for India

Platform to Assert Net Security Provider Role

1. India's SAGAR doctrine (2015) and MAHASAGAR vision (2025) position India as the preferred security partner and first responder in the Indian Ocean.
2. IORA gives this posture a legitimate multilateral institutional home enabling leadership without appearing unilateral or hegemonic.

Counterweight to Chinese Influence

1. China is only a Dialogue Partner in IORA, not a Member State, giving India structural leadership advantages.
2. Unlike China's BRI, IORA under Indian leadership provides an alternative framework for connectivity and cooperation that is not transactional or debt-laden.

Energy and Trade Security

1. IORA is India's institutional mechanism to keep sea lanes stable through diplomacy before crises require naval deployments.
2. Coordinated maritime domain awareness and information-sharing reduce risks of supply disruptions.

Blue Economy and Economic Diversification

1. IORA's Blue Economy focus area directly supports India's ability to set regional standards, attract investment, and build partnerships for sustainable ocean resource use.
2. India can promote responsible fishing, marine conservation, and ocean-based economic activities.

Diplomatic Relevance

1. IORA is one of few multilateral spaces where India is a founding voice and current Chair allowing it to shape rules on UNCLOS interpretation, freedom of navigation, sustainable fisheries, and maritime dispute resolution.

Distinct Identity from Overlapping Groupings

1. IORA's unique value is its geographic coverage bringing together East Africa, Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australia under one roof unlike BIMSTEC, Quad, SCO, or IONS.

Disaster Diplomacy and Humanitarian Leadership

1. India has consistently been the first responder to natural disasters from the 2004 tsunami to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar.
2. IORA's Disaster Risk Management framework institutionalizes this role, allowing India to coordinate regional response mechanisms.

4. Challenges Limiting IORA's Effectiveness

Institutional Weakness

1. IORA functions on voluntary commitments and consensus lacking enforcement mechanisms unlike ASEAN or Quad with more operational coordination capacity.

Geopolitical Rivalries

1. India's deliberate exclusion of Pakistan from IORA reflects bilateral tensions that hobble SAARC.
2. Member states' competing allegiances to different power blocs create coordination difficulties.

Fragmented Regionalism

1. IORA competes for member-states' attention and resources with at least 14 other regional or international bodies.
2. Overlap with BIMSTEC, ASEAN, Quad, and IONS can dilute IORA's cohesion.

Unequal Development

1. IORA brings together UAE, Singapore, and Australia alongside Mozambique, Comoros, and Somalia.
2. This disparity in economic weight creates uneven benefits from participation and can breed resentment.

Limited Security Mandate

1. IORA's charter explicitly excludes bilateral disputes from deliberations, making it difficult to address conflicts reshaping maritime security.

No Military Dimension

1. Unlike Quad or IONS, IORA has no mechanism for joint naval operations or coordinated military response to threats.

5.Way Forward

Strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness

1. Expand satellite surveillance, information-sharing mechanisms building on IFC-IOR, and real-time coordination systems like MANTRA across more IORA members ensuring comprehensive tracking of maritime activities, while establishing regional fusion centers pooling intelligence from multiple sources enabling early threat detection and coordinated responses.

Institutionalize Blue Economy

1. Create enforceable standards for sustainable fisheries, marine pollution control, and ocean-based economic activities ensuring environmental sustainability, while expanding initiatives like IORA Blue Carbon Hub run by Australia's CSIRO replicating successful models for marine conservation and climate mitigation across member states.

Deepen Cooperation on Non-Traditional Threats

1. Address piracy, IUU (Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated) fishing, drug trafficking, and climate-induced disasters crossing maritime zones requiring coordinated responses, while establishing joint task forces, information-sharing protocols, and rapid response mechanisms enabling effective action against transnational maritime threats.

Expand IORA's Budget and Governance

1. India should boost IORA's institutional capacity through increased financial contributions and public-private partnerships from maritime sectors like shipping, oil, gas, and tourism strengthening secretariat capabilities, while encouraging other member states to contribute proportionally creating sustainable funding base.

Build Maritime Human Capital

1. Develop academic partnerships creating marine-focused courses producing skilled regional workforce particularly for blue economy sectors, while establishing IORA Maritime University or virtual education network facilitating knowledge exchange and capacity building across member states.

Conclusion

The 10th Indian Ocean Dialogue held in New Delhi under India's IORA Chairship (2025-27) focused on maritime security, blue economy, and innovation under MAHASAGAR vision amid escalating West



Asian conflicts and the March 2026 Iranian frigate sinking near Sri Lanka. IORA, formed March 1997 from Nelson Mandela's vision, has 23 Member States, 12 Dialogue Partners, with Secretariat in Mauritius. For India, over 90% trade volume and 85% oil imports transit the Indian Ocean. IORA provides platforms for security provider role, counterweight to Chinese influence (China is only Dialogue Partner), energy security, blue economy leadership, and diplomatic relevance. Challenges include institutional weakness, geopolitical rivalries, fragmented regionalism, unequal development, limited security mandate, and no military dimension requiring strengthened maritime domain awareness, institutionalized blue economy, non-traditional threat cooperation, expanded budgets, and maritime human capital development.

Source - <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/41118/10th+Indian+Ocean+Dialogue+May+0708+2026>