

3. Conference on Oceans Law & Policy – International Organization

Dr. M. Ravichandran underscored Indian Ocean's strategic importance, opportunities, and challenges at the 48th Annual Conference on Oceans Law & Policy (COLP48). The Indian Ocean Region is a critical strategic imperative for India's trade and security, facing challenges from China's expanding naval and infrastructural presence. India is responding by bolstering its own naval capabilities and diplomatic leadership to position itself as a net security provider in the region.

The 48th Annual Conference on Oceans Law & Policy (COLP48)

A Landmark Event for India – For the first time in its nearly 50-year history, the prestigious COLP conference was hosted in the Indian subcontinent, signifying India's growing prominence in global maritime affairs.

Organizers and Objective – The conference was organized by the Stockton Center for International Law (U.S. Naval War College) and Gujarat Maritime University. Its primary objective is to foster high-level dialogue on legal and policy issues surrounding the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), maritime security, and the sustainable use of marine resources.

India's 5 Priorities for Ocean Governance – At the conference, India outlined five priority areas, articulating a vision for ocean governance from a developing world perspective –

1. **Sustainable Livelihoods** – Ensuring food and economic security for coastal communities through sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.
2. **Regional Cooperation** – Deepening South-South solidarity among Indian Ocean Rim nations to collectively address shared challenges.
3. **Integrated Governance** – Combining modern science with traditional ecological knowledge and ensuring participatory governance.
4. **Climate Resilience** – Promoting ecosystem-based approaches to protect marine biodiversity and build resilience against climate change.
5. **Capacity Building** – Mobilizing innovative finance and building technical capacity for ocean research, technology, and governance.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) – An Overview

Geography and Scale – The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean, covering about one-fifth of the world's total ocean area. It is a semi-enclosed sea bounded by Asia to the north, Africa to the west, Australia to the east, and the Southern Ocean to the south.

Critical Maritime Chokepoints – The IOR is home to some of the world's most vital maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Malacca Strait, through which a significant portion of global trade and energy flows.

The Strategic Significance of the Indian Ocean Region

Economic Lifeline – The IOR is a superhighway for global commerce, carrying nearly 50% of the world's container traffic and 80% of its seaborne oil trade. Its stability is therefore essential for the global economy.

Geostrategic Epicenter – The IOR acts as a strategic bridge connecting the East and the West. This has made it a central arena for geopolitical competition among major powers, including India, China, and the United States.

Energy Security – The region is the primary transit route for energy supplies from West Asia to the major economies of East Asia like China, Japan, and South Korea, making its security indispensable for their energy needs.

Rise of the Indo-Pacific – The emergence of the "Indo-Pacific" as a single strategic construct has further elevated the IOR's importance, placing it at the heart of the new global maritime order.

Key Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region

Expansion of Chinese Naval Power – The most significant challenge is the increasing assertiveness of China, marked by –

1. The growing presence and duration of PLA Navy deployments.
2. The operation of "research vessels" to conduct maritime domain awareness activities and gather sensitive oceanographic data.
3. The development of strategic, dual-use (commercial and military) ports in nations near India, often referred to as the "String of Pearls" strategy.

Transnational Maritime Threats – The region continues to face threats from piracy (especially near the Horn of Africa), maritime terrorism, arms smuggling, and illegal trafficking networks.

India's Strategic Responses as a Net Security Provider

Diplomatic and Security Leadership – India has positioned itself as a "First Responder" and "Preferred Security Partner" in the region, leading in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Initiatives like MAHASAGAR reflect India's vision of being a net security provider.

Naval Modernisation – India is bolstering its maritime deterrence through a focus on indigenous naval development, highlighted by the commissioning of advanced warships like the aircraft carrier INS Vikrant and the destroyer INS Visakhapatnam.

Regional Diplomacy – India is actively working with regional partners to raise awareness about the long-term security implications of China's infrastructure projects and the risks associated with their potential military use.

Stance Against Militarisation – India firmly asserts that the militarisation of the IOR is undesirable and will adversely impact regional security, signaling its clear opposition to any single power's attempt to dominate the region.

Conclusion – The IOR as India's Strategic Imperative

For India, the Indian Ocean Region is not merely a geographical feature but a core strategic imperative that is central to its national security, economic prosperity, and global leadership ambitions. This centrality is reflected in cornerstone foreign policy initiatives like the Act East Policy, the Indo-Pacific Vision, and the focus on developing a sustainable Blue Economy.

Source – <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2165373>

