MAINS 2016 CURRENT AFFAIRS
GENERAL STUDIES 2
32. INDIAN OCEAN STRATEGY

The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest body of water and has become a growing area of competition between China and India. The two regional powers' moves to exert influence in the ocean include deep-water port development in littoral states and military patrols. Though experts say the probability of military conflict between China and India remains low, escalated activities (such as port development and military exercises) and rhetoric could endanger stability in a critical region for global trade flows. But the diverse nontraditional security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) also offer areas of potential collaboration for China and India, as well as other regional actors.

IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN
The Indian Ocean covers at least one fifth of the world's total ocean area and is bounded by Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (known as the western Indian Ocean), India's coastal waters (the central Indian Ocean), and the Bay of Bengal near Myanmar and Indonesia (the eastern Indian Ocean). It provides critical sea trade routes that connect the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia with the broader Asian continent to the east and Europe to the west. A number of the world's most important strategic chokepoints, including the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca through which 32.2 millions of barrels of crude oil and petroleum are transported per day-more than 50 percent of the world's maritime oil trade-are found in the Indian Ocean Region, which itself is believed to be rich with energy reserves. Nearly 40 percent of the world's offshore petroleum is produced in the Indian Ocean, coastal beaches and offshore waters host heavy mineral deposits, and fisheries are increasingly important for both exports and domestic consumption.

INDIAN OCEAN-A SOURCE OF COMPETITION
China and India are dependent on energy resources transported via the secure sealanes in the Indian Ocean to fuel their economies. India imports nearly 80 percent of its energy, mostly oil from the Middle East, and is due to overtake Japan as the world's third largest energy consumer (behind China and the United States). According to a U.S. Department of Defense report, 84 percent of China's imported energy resources passed through Strait of Malacca from the Indian Ocean in 2012. As Beijing and New Delhi press to maintain economic growth, their dependency on the safe transport of resources will likely intensify. China's growing global influence and India's rapid economic rise have heightened the ocean's strategic value. Meanwhile, the United States' rebalance to Asia-shifting from a foreign policy dominated by the Middle East to one more centered on Asia has also been a contributing factor elevating concern over Indian Ocean security. Diverse security challenges affect the region ranging from natural disasters to concerns over energy security, piracy, and military posturing.

CHINA-INDIA COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN
Both countries have developed initiatives to bolster infrastructure and other connections in the region, which the World Bank describes as among the "least economically integrated." Competition between Beijing and New Delhi is not necessarily overt, but each country is seeking to strengthen ties with smaller regional states to secure their respective security and economic interests.

Beijing's regional vision, backed by $40 billion of pledged investment, outlines its One Belt, One Road plan-combining the revitalization of ancient land-based trade routes, the Silk Road Economic Belt, with a Maritime Silk Road. China's ties with regional states have deepened, including the influx of Chinese capital into construction projects in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Since launching counter piracy operations in 2009, Beijing has become increasingly active in the region. China has also undertaken efforts to modernize its military, particularly its naval deployment capabilities to protect overseas interests like personnel, property, and investments. Experts also argue that Beijing's forays into what is at times described as India's neighbourhood are driven by China's excess capacity challenges, incentivizing Chinese firms out of domestic markets to compete in and open new markets abroad.
For its part, India sees itself as the **natural preeminent regional power**. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has doubled down on fostering stronger diplomatic, economic, and security ties with IOR maritime states as a means to strengthen India's economy, establish its role as a **driver of regional growth**, and simultaneously diminish China's growing appeal.

It is India's neighbourhood that holds the key to its emergence as a regional and global power. Though Beijing deflects claims of hegemonic aspirations, it identifies security in the IOR as a primary concern for Chinese "core interests." In 2015, a white paper charting China's military strategy indicated a shift of People's Liberation Army Navy to focus on both offshore water defense and open seas protection. Chinese behavior suggests that **Beijing seeks to establish a persistent regional maritime presence.** It now boasts a semipermanent naval presence through its counter piracy activities in the Indian Ocean and has more **aggressively asserted itself in the Pacific** with extensive patrols and land reclamation projects in disputed waters.

China's ambitions in the region have been described by many scholars by the "**string of pearls**" metaphor, which holds that China is taking on economic and investment projects with Indian Ocean states to secure ports or places where its military forces could set up naval facilities or at the very least, refueling and repair stations. Chinese experts dismiss this, claiming that China seeks access, not bases, for economic gain. As rising powers, China and India's pursuit of partnerships with smaller regional states is inevitable. A "tit-for-tat politico-military escalation" is possible in the larger Indo-Pacific, a region spanning both the Indian and Pacific oceans.

**OTHER COUNTRIES WITH STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE IOR**

Small regional states, such as Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Seychelles and Sri Lanka, are recipients of both Chinese and Indian aid and investment, primarily for transport and infrastructure development. The majority of their foreign policy ties are determined by what deals can be made to help them meet their national development goals.

Global powers from outside of the region also have an interest in maintaining the ocean's security. The **United States** operates a naval support facility-Diego Garcia on UK leased territory in the central Indian Ocean, while **France** maintains a presence in the region from Reunion, its Indian Ocean island outpost. **Australia** has a modern naval force operating in the ocean, and the IOR is increasingly featured in defense, national security, and maritime strategies developed in Canberra.

**AREAS SHOWING POTENTIAL FOR EXPANDED COOPERATION:**

Despite the rise in competition, multilateral cooperation involving China, India, and other states, takes place on issues including piracy, disaster relief, and drug smuggling.

**COUNTERPIRACY**

Piracy has been costly to ocean-faring traders but global and regional responses have shown success. **Counter piracy efforts near the Gulf of Aden** have been the most successful manifestation of regional cooperation. More than eighty countries, organizations, and industry groups participate in operations in the IOR under the auspices of the ad hoc, voluntary **Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia** (CGPCS), created in January 2009 in response to UN Security Council Resolution 1851 on Somali piracy and armed robbery at sea. Since military cooperation began, the volume of attacks has shrunk. Yet experts warn that pirates have turned to more sophisticated equipment and if naval pressure in the western Indian Ocean is reduced, pirate activity would rise again.

China and India carry out anti-piracy activities independently, deploying naval vessels to escort merchant ships, protect merchant vessels, conduct rescue operations, and confiscate contraband. In April 2016, China dispatched its twentieth naval escort task force to the Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, **India** has prevented forty piracy attempts and developed an **online registration service** for merchants to request Indian naval escorts.

**SEARCH AND RESCUE**

Another recent example of cooperation was the search effort for the Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which disappeared en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing in March 2014. At the height of operations,
twenty-six countries, including China and India, contributed to the search mission. Wreckage believed to be from the flight was discovered in July 2015.

**DISASTER RELIEF**
There is room for growth on humanitarian aid and disaster relief cooperation. After the **2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami**, governments, including Australia, France, India, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the UK, and the United States, participated in extensive relief and rehabilitation efforts (PDF). Separately, China disbursed more than $62.2 million in aid, shipped supplies, and dispatched medical and rescue teams. More than a decade later, the IOR's vulnerability to natural disasters and the subsequent effects of climate change could provide impetus for more extensive collaboration.

**FISHERIES**
Consumers in Indo-Pacific countries on average obtain 20 to 50 percent of their animal protein from fish, and industrial fishing is an important export for smaller countries in the IOR. Regional players identify overfishing and environmental degradation as serious risks to sustainable economic development and food security, but mechanisms to establish sustainable fisheries have not been effective.

**PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVED REGIONAL GOVERNANCE**
Experts say there is a growing need for an effective regional security architecture, similar to extant mechanisms among major powers in the East and South China seas, to address the IOR's diverse challenges. Regional multilateral organizations, such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which facilitates the exchange of military views to enhance communication and transparency across the region's naval forces, do exist. However, IOR members must undergo an extensive region-building project for countries to be willing to act together more effectively.

China and India have expressed eagerness to assume greater responsibility in policing maritime global commons and to be recognized as major powers. China's activities are likely to expand in conjunction with its One Belt, One Road initiative, but this does not have to come at India's expense. India is going to have to come to terms with China's entry into the Indian Ocean. New Delhi could also benefit from partnering with Beijing to integrate the region. Broader initiatives like the BRICS Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are also pulling India into to a larger leadership role alongside China.

**INDIA'S OCEAN STRATEGY**
On a March 2015 trip to Seychelles and Mauritius, Narendra Modi outlined a bold framework that overturned the political approach that India had taken towards the Indian Ocean for half a century. He promised to plug that gap between good ideas and their implementation.

Modi's March 2015 visit to the Seychelles and Mauritius provided him with an opportunity to signal that the Indian Ocean littoral is at the "top of Delhi's policy priorities. In his remarks in Mauritius, Modi laid out a five-fold framework for India's maritime engagement with the Indian Ocean littoral.

Modi's first principle is that Delhi will do whatever may be necessary to secure India's mainland and island territories and defend its maritime interests. Since the terror attack on Mumbai at the end of November 2008, Delhi has been acutely conscious of the potential terrorist attacks coming via the sea. At the same Delhi has also been deeply aware of the growing strategic significance of the Indian Ocean in global politics.

The second dimension of Modi's framework focuses on deepening security cooperation with regional partners. India has long had close security partnerships with both Seychelles and Mauritius; Modi now wants to elevate these. In Seychelles, Modi announced the gift of a second Dornier aircraft for maritime monitoring, signed an agreement for conducting hydrographic surveys, and launched a coastal surveillance radar project. The radar initiative is part of an ambitious project to build a maritime domain awareness network across the Indian Ocean. It calls for the establishment of eight surveillance radars in Mauritius, eight in Seychelles, six in Sri Lanka, and ten in Maldives. These
will be linked to over 50 sites on the Indian coast and connected to an integrated analysis center near Delhi. In Mauritius, Modi attended the commissioning of the Indian-made offshore patrol vessel Barracuda, marking his commitment to maritime capacity building in small island republics. He also announced agreements to develop infrastructure for connectivity in the Assumption Island in the Seychelles and Aga Lega in Mauritius. These are likely to strengthen the defense capabilities of the two republics and give India a valuable foothold at critical locations in South Western Indian Ocean.

The third level of Modi’s framework relates to building multilateral cooperative maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Modi said India will help strengthen regional mechanisms in combating terrorism and piracy and responding to natural disasters. He expressed the hope that Mauritius, Seychelles and other countries will join the trilateral security initiative it already has with Maldives and Sri Lanka. This sets the stage for very productive multilateral maritime security cooperation in the littoral with India at the core. According to some analysts, India’s access to strategic facilities in Seychelles and Mauritius marks a major departure from its traditional opposition to foreign military bases. Although calling these arrangements “bases” might be premature, they point to future possibilities for an expanded Indian strategic footprint in the littoral.

The fourth element of Modi’s maritime policy is sustainable economic development. In Seychelles, Modi announced a joint working group to expand cooperation on the “blue economy” that will increase littoral states’ understanding of ecology, resources, and allow them to harness the ocean in a sustainable manner. He also demonstrated considerable sensitivity to climate change concerns in the island nations.

Finally, Modi has discarded India’s longstanding reluctance to cooperate with other major powers in the Indian Ocean. While insisting that Indian Ocean states hold the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in those waters, Modi indirectly referenced the role that the United States plays in the region through dialogue, exercises, economic partnerships, and capacity building efforts. There can be no doubt that Modi has made a decisive break from the ambivalence of the UPA government. This was evinced during the recent visit of U.S. President Barack Obama, when Modi and Obama announced the renewal of their defense framework agreement and signed a broad framework for expanding cooperation in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific.

In Mauritius, Modi reinforced this framework when he declared that “our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other’s interests; peaceful resolution of maritime issues; and increase in maritime cooperation.” While signalling a new approach to America, Modi has, however, also left the door open for China. His openness towards the U.S. might actually improve Delhi’s strategic bargaining position with Beijing.

In sum, there is no doubt that Modi has embarked on a more ambitious foreign policy in the Indian Ocean. He is determined to build on India’s natural geographic advantages in the littoral. Modi’s India is no longer hesitant about taking a larger responsibility for securing the Indian Ocean and promoting regional mechanisms for collective security and economic integration. It is confident enough to collaborate with the United States in self-interest and engage China on maritime issues with greater self-assurance. Yet it is important to remember that Modi’s vision is only the first step towards rejuvenating Delhi’s Indian Ocean strategy. Modi’s policy will face the familiar test of implementation where Delhi has had multiple problems in the past.

PROJECT MAUSAM

The Project Mausam is considered the Modi government’s most significant foreign policy initiative designed to counter China. It is inspired by India’s historical role as the focal point for trade in the Indian Ocean. In pre-modern times, sailors used seasonal monsoons to swiftly journey across the Indian Ocean. This trip usually involved starting from one of the edges of the ocean, around today’s Indonesia or east Africa, sailing to India, stopping, and allowing another crew to wait for another monsoon to sail to the other edge of the Indian Ocean, as different monsoon winds blew in different directions at different times of the year. Crews would frequently winter for months in India or at one of the edges of the ocean waiting for another season of monsoons. This allowed for significant cultural
exchanges as diverse people from different places would often spend months at a time living in foreign countries (Islam is said to have entered Indonesia in this manner).

Project Mausam would allow India to reestablish its ties with its ancient trade partners and re-establish an “Indian Ocean world” along the littoral of the Indian Ocean. This world would stretch from east Africa, along the Arabian Peninsula, past southern Iran to the major countries of South Asia and thence to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

The endeavour of Project ‘Mausam’ is to position itself at two levels: at the macro level it aims to re-connect and re-establish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean world, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; while at the micro level the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu.

The central themes that hold Project ‘Mausam’ together are those of cultural routes and maritime landscapes that not only linked different parts of the Indian Ocean littoral, but also connected the coastal centres to their hinterlands. More importantly shared knowledge systems and ideas spread along these routes and impacted both coastal centres, and also large parts of the environs.

Project ‘Mausam’ is an exciting, multi-disciplinary project that rekindles long-lost ties across nations of the Indian Ocean ‘world’ and forges new avenues of cooperation and exchange. The project, launched by India in partnership with member states, will enable a significant step in recording and celebrating this important phase of world history from the African, Arab and Asian-world perspectives.

INDIA TO DEVELOP NAVAL BASE IN SEYCHELLES

- The Seychelles government has joined hands with India to build India's naval base on the Assumption Island in the Indian Ocean region as a joint project between both countries.
- The island country has allocated a plot of land on the Assumption Island, which will help to enhance maritime security along India's west and south coast. This initiative has come following China's establishment of its first African naval base in Djibouti in November 2014.
- The new naval base aims to put an end to piracy around the East African part of the Indian Ocean. Besides, India will also acquire a fully operational coastal radar system in Seychelles from March 2016.
- Relationship between India and Seychelles has positively improved in the past few years. Indian music maestro, A.R. Rahman was named as the Ambassador of Seychelles in October 2015.

INDIA MALDIVES RELATIONS

- As the President of Maldives, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, is on a two-day visit to New Delhi.
- Maldives is cooperating in counter-terrorism arena with India. Maldives recently arrested 40 of its nationals, who were reportedly fighting alongside the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.
- Maldives and the Indian government are negotiating a double-tax avoidance agreement. India is in the process of signing DTAA with various countries, which are perceived to be tax havens in order to check the flow of blackmoney.
- India's change in policy towards the Maldives a little after Prime Minister Narendra Modi skipped Maldives in his Indian Ocean region tour has helped to thaw relations. India has been largely silent on the major assault on democratic institutions and the Opposition in the archipelago nation, while most countries which have a stake in the region, including the US, UK, and the European Union, have condemned the Yameen Government's transgressions.

INDIA SUPPORTING MALDIVES

Indian Army's 'Operation Cactus' foiled a coup in Maldives that was attempted by a pro-Eelam group in 1988. India maintains a naval presence in Maldives, at the request of the Maldives, since 2009. President Yameen, in an interview had said, "If Indian Army had not come to our rescue, we would have lost independence during the past 50 years."
Indian Coast Guard’s Dornier was the first to land at the Ibrahim Nasir Airport with relief and supplies after the tsunami of December 26, 2004.

Maldives has pledged its support to India as a permanent member of an expanded UN Security Council.

On December 5, 2014, India dispatched “water aid” to the Maldivian capital of Male, after a fire destroyed the generator of its biggest water treatment plant.

MALDIVES-CHINA COOPERATION

India is uneasy with Maldives’s relationship with China. There were media reports that China was looking to establish a base in Maldives after leasing out one of the islands under the liberalised leasing scheme brought in by the Yameen Government, which was denied by both Male and Beijing. The country’s former President Mohamed Nasheed has more than once even commented on Maldives’ ‘pro-China’ tilt.

China is assisting Maldives in some infrastructure and developmental projects, including a bridge between the island in which the airport is located, Hulhumale, and the capital island, Male, which is about 10 minutes by a passenger ferry. Maldives is also part of China’s Silk Road project, a move that has not gone down well in New Delhi. The President’s Office, has however, repeatedly clarified that China policy does not interfere with or diminish the country’s “special relationship” with India.

MALDIVIAN POLITICS

Ever since Nasheed, the first democratically-elected President of Maldives, was made to step down after a series of events that has been described in some quarters as a coup, the Indian Ocean archipelago is witnessing political tussles. Nasheed had taken refuge at Indian High Commission once, fearing arrest under the regime of his successor and former Vice President, Mohamed Waheed.

India had assisted Maldives’ election process by sending its observers, and had also withdrawn observers at one point because the electoral process was neither free nor fair. Maldivian government took several steps to bolster Mr. Yameen’s authority such as removal of Chief Justice, police chiefs and arrest of Vice President and former Defence Minister. These incidents earned widespread condemnations from various countries, including India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi skipped Maldives in his Indian Ocean tour.

GMR ISSUE

Relations between India and Maldives came under a strain after Male had terminated the agreement it entered into with GMR in 2010 for the modernisation of the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport. The airport was taken over by the Maldives Airports Company Limited after a high-voltage legal tussle in which GMR won. Maldives government maintains the reason for cancellation of the project was because “the contract was illegally awarded” by the then President Nasheed. The country’s anti-graft watchdog has ruled out any corruption in the leasing of the international airport to GMR. The airport expansion project was subsequently given to the Chinese company, which will plough in US $800 million. GMR, meanwhile, has won an arbitration against the Maldives. The quantum of damages to be paid by the Maldives is yet to announce by the arbitration tribunal in Singapore.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

1. Project ‘Mausam’ is considered as a unique foreign policy initiative of the Indian government to improve relationship with its neighbours. Does the project has a strategic dimension? Discuss. (2015)

MODEL QUESTION
1. Critically analyse the importance of Indian Ocean to the future of the world and India and outline the security issues faced by India in safeguarding its maritime interests in the Indian Ocean region.