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DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

RISING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

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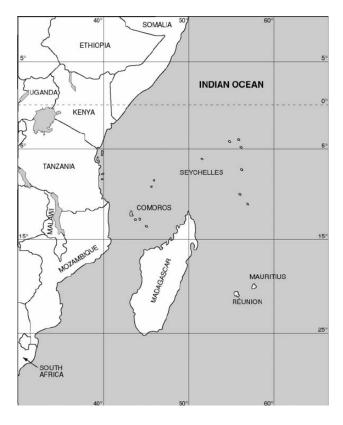
RISING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

Context

• The **Western Indian Ocean (WIO**) has emerged as a pivotal maritime region where security, trade, and diplomacy converge, once seen as a remote expanse, and a peripheral concern in global geopolitics.

About the Western Indian Ocean (WIO)

• It stretches from the **eastern coast of Africa to the Arabian Sea**, encompassing countries like *Somalia*, *Kenya*, *Tanzania*, *Mozambique*, *South Africa*, *Comoros*, *Madagascar*, *Seychelles*, *Mauritius*, *and Réunion*.



- It connects key maritime chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb, the Mozambique Channel, and the Strait of Hormuz, making it a vital corridor for energy and trade.
- It is one of the busiest and most closely monitored maritime corridors in the world, stretching from the **Horn** of Africa to the Mozambique Channel, and dotted with island nations like Seychelles, Mauritius, and Madagascar.
- It is home to about 36 countries and almost 40% of the world's coastline, making it a vital hub for commerce and connectivity that fuel economies across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Maritime Security Challenges

- **Piracy and Armed Robbery:** The resurgence of piracy off Somalia and narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan pose persistent threats to maritime security.
 - Recent disruptions in the **Red Sea and Gulf of Aden** have reignited concerns.
- Narcotics and Illicit Trafficking: Indian Navy operations, such as the seizure of 2,500 kg of narcotics by INS Tarkash, highlight the region's vulnerability to transnational crime.
- **Non-Traditional Threats:** Climate change, illegal fishing, and maritime disasters require coordinated responses.
 - ◆ There is a need for enhanced **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** through real-time data sharing among regional stakeholders.



- **China's Naval Expansion:** China's growing presence, including naval activity and infrastructure investments, has added a layer of strategic competition in the region.
 - Recently, China's **48th Naval Escort Fleet**, comprising the destroyer *Tangshan* and the frigate *Daqing*, embarked on **anti-piracy mission** to the **Gulf of Aden**.
 - China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** has driven massive investment in WIO port infrastructure from **Djibouti**, where **its first overseas military base** is located, to **Gwadar** in Pakistan.
 - China's deployment of research and survey vessels in the eastern Indian Ocean further reveals dual objectives: mapping seabeds for scientific purposes while potentially enhancing submarine warfare capabilities.
- **Climate-Induced Disasters:** Rising sea levels, coral bleaching, and extreme weather events threaten coastal communities and marine ecosystems.

India's Maritime Strategy and Regional Engagement

- India's maritime approach emphasizes partnerships, trust, and a rules-based order, unlike China.
 - While **India never issued** an explicit '**Monroe Doctrine**' for the **Indian Ocean**, its influence has been widely acknowledged among littoral nations.
- Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR Doctrine): It integrates defence cooperation, capacity building, humanitarian aid, and environmental protection.
- **Combined Maritime Forces (CMF):** India's participation in CMF and its support for regional capacity-building through naval exercises and humanitarian missions reflect its growing influence.
- **Environmental and Economic Projects:** Projects like SOLSTICE-WIO, endorsed by INCOIS, aim to enhance ecosystem research and promote sustainable livelihoods in coastal communities.
 - The region's estimated natural resource value exceeds US\$ 300 billion, underscoring the need for balanced development.
- Operational Strength: India strengthens interoperability with partners, through naval exercises like Konkan
 2024
 - The Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram acts as a regional intelligence hub, connecting India with African and Indo-Pacific nations for real-time maritime awareness, disaster response, and climate resilience.
- The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and partnerships with France, the US, Japan, and Australia reflect India's commitment to multilateral stability.
- Access to key facilities such as Duqm Port (Oman) and Réunion Island (France) enhances India's
 operational reach and rapid response capability.

Africa's Central Role

- The WIO region forms a **critical bridge between Africa and Asia**. India's growing ties with these nations are both strategic and developmental.
- Partnership in Action:
 - In **Mauritius:** India has invested over **\$680 million** in infrastructure, healthcare, and maritime security, including Port Louis redevelopment.
 - In Seychelles: Joint naval training enhances local defence capabilities.
 - In **Mozambique:** India's participation in the **\$20 billion LNG project** with TotalEnergies boosts regional energy resilience and local employment.
- India's engagement aligns with **Africa's Agenda 2063**, emphasizing skills development, blue economy growth, and sustainable governance positioning India as a partner of choice over debt-laden alternatives.

Way Forward

Safeguarding Critical Chokepoints: The WIO hosts some of the world's most vital maritime chokepoints
 — the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel — through which much of India's
 oil supply flows.



- India collaborates with regional and global partners, including France, the UAE, the US, and Saudi
 Arabia, conducting joint patrols, information-sharing missions, and maritime security exercises, to
 secure these arteries.
- Balancing Power with Responsibility: Smaller island states prioritize climate security, sustainability, and development areas where India's inclusive, capacity-building approach resonates strongly.
 - By linking defence assistance with environmental and developmental initiatives, India distinguishes itself as a **responsible maritime power** rather than a hegemon.
- Shaping the Region's Future: The Western Indian Ocean stands at the crossroads of security, trade, and diplomacy. As China expands its presence, India's sustained engagement through partnership-driven policies ensures that the region remains open, stable, and secure.
 - For India, the WIO is the **strategic heart of its Indo-Pacific vision** and its actions will define the regional balance of power, economic interdependence, and maritime governance for decades to come.

Source: First Post

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] Discuss the factors contributing to the rising strategic significance of the Western Indian Ocean and evaluate how regional and extra-regional powers are reshaping its geopolitical landscape.

