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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# IONS 2026 — India's Second Chairmanship and the Test of Maritime Leadership



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# IONS 2026 — India's Second Chairmanship and the Test of Maritime Leadership

 Hindustan Times

30 March 2026

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE



*"India has assumed IONS chairmanship for 2026-2028 with the SAGAR doctrine as its foundation — but with China expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean through Djibouti, Gwadar, and Hambantota, can India's cooperative security framework be sufficient?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

India hosted the **IONS Maritime Exercise** at Kochi's Maritime Warfare Centre, with 12 nations participating — the first major exercise since India assumed the **IONS Chairmanship for 2026–2028**, its first return to the chair since IONS's founding in 2008.

## INDIA'S MARITIME MOMENT

Sixteen years after initiating the **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)** as a voluntary, consensus-based forum for Indian Ocean naval cooperation, India has returned to its leadership chair. The timing is significant. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in 2026 is a fundamentally different strategic landscape from 2008: Chinese naval deployments have extended from the South China Sea to Djibouti (China's only overseas military base), Gwadar port (Pakistan, under CPEC financing), and Hambantota (Sri Lanka, 99-year lease). The Indian Ocean is no longer India's backyard — it has become a contested maritime space.

India's response to this strategic challenge has been layered: the QUAD (with the United States, Japan, and Australia) for deterrence and high-end maritime competition; and IONS for cooperative, inclusive security engagement with the broader IOR community. These are not competing strategies — they are complementary. QUAD signals to China that major democracies will collectively resist coercion. IONS signals to smaller IOR states that India offers multilateral security partnership rather than hegemonic replacement of one external patron with another.

## THE EXERCISE AT KOCHI — WHAT IT REVEALED

The March 2026 IONS exercise at the Maritime Warfare Centre, Kochi brought together 12 member navies: Bangladesh, France, Indonesia, Kenya, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Timor-Leste.

The scenarios — counter-piracy, human trafficking interdiction, HADR coordination, and maritime domain awareness — reflected IONS's core focus on **non-traditional maritime security threats**. This is deliberate. IONS is not a collective defence alliance and does not conduct joint warfighting exercises against a common adversary. Its value lies precisely in building the **interoperability, information-sharing habits, and trust** that allow these 12 navies to coordinate effectively when a real crisis occurs — a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal, a hijacking in the Gulf of Aden, a drug trafficking interdiction in the Mozambique Channel.

France's presence is worth noting. France holds Indian Ocean territories — Reunion Island and Mayotte — making it technically an IOR littoral state. French naval involvement in IOR exercises aligns with Paris's **Indopacifique strategy**, which increasingly frames France as an Indo-Pacific power with sovereign interests in the region.

## THE IFC-IOR: INFORMATION AS THE NEW SEA CONTROL

India's most underappreciated maritime investment is the **Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)**, established in Gurugram (Haryana) in December 2018. The IFC-IOR is India's maritime domain awareness hub — a real-time information platform for **white shipping** (commercial vessel tracking), suspicious vessel activity, and emergency coordination.

As of 2026, IFC-IOR has established partnerships with 24 nations and 6 international organisations for white shipping information exchange. This makes it the largest maritime information network in the Indian Ocean — broader even than the US-linked Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) networks in the region.

Under India's IONS chairmanship (2026–2028), a priority should be formally integrating IFC-IOR into IONS's Working Group 1 (Information Sharing and Interoperability) framework — creating a standardised data-sharing protocol across all 24 IONS member navies. This would transform IFC-IOR from India's **unilateral** initiative into a multilateral IOR asset.

## SAGAR'S LIMITS AND THE WAY FORWARD

The SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region), articulated by PM Modi in Mauritius in 2015, positions India as the **net security provider** for the IOR — offering security as a public good rather than as leverage. This is the right strategic concept. But execution has limits.

**Capacity constraints:** India’s navy, despite significant modernisation (INS Vikrant commissioned 2022, 2 aircraft carriers operational), still lacks sufficient hulls for persistent presence across the IOR’s 70 million square kilometers.

**Political constraints:** India’s diplomatic restraint — its reluctance to designate China explicitly as a threat in multilateral forums — limits IONS from becoming a China-balancing instrument. IONS operates by consensus, and several IONS members have deep economic relationships with China.

**Credibility gap:** India’s role as a security provider is strongest in the western Indian Ocean (Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf corridor) through Operation Sankalp. In the eastern IOR (Bay of Bengal, Strait of Malacca), Indian presence is thinner and Chinese influence is expanding.

The 2026–2028 chairmanship should focus on three deliverables: formalising IFC-IOR as a multilateral MDA platform, developing a maritime HADR response protocol with pre-agreed roles and logistics, and expanding IONS membership to include currently absent IOR states.

#### UPSC RELEVANCE

IONS founded 2008; India chairmanship 2026–2028; IFC-IOR (2018, Gurugram); SAGAR doctrine (2015, Mauritius); Operation Sankalp; UNCLOS.

#### MAINS GS-2 (IR/SECURITY):

India’s Indo-Pacific strategy; SAGAR; QUAD vs. IONS complementarity; China’s IOR presence (Djibouti, Gwadar, Hambantota).

#### MAINS GS-3 (SECURITY):

Maritime domain awareness; non-traditional security threats; blue-water navy.

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### IONS AND INDIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY:

IONS: Founded 2008 by India; ~24 member navies; voluntary/consensus-based

India IONS chairmanship: 2008–2010 (founding) + 2026–2028 (current, second term)

Exercise venue: Maritime Warfare Centre (MWC), Kochi, Southern Naval Command

IFC-IOR: Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region; Gurugram; established December 2018

IFC-IOR partners: 24 nations + 6 international organisations (white shipping info sharing)

SAGAR doctrine: Security and Growth for All in the Region; PM Modi, Mauritius, March 2015

### CHINESE IOR PRESENCE:

Djibouti: China's only overseas military base (since 2017)

Gwadar port: Pakistan; CPEC financing; Chinese navy access rights discussions

Hambantota: Sri Lanka; 99-year lease to CMPORT (Chinese company) since 2017

China's String of Pearls: Conceptual framework for China's IOR port investments (coined 2005)

### INDIA'S NAVAL CAPABILITY:

INS Vikrant: India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier; commissioned September 2022

INS Vikramaditya: India's second operational carrier (ex-Soviet Gorshkov; commissioned 2013)

Indian Navy fleet: ~140+ warships

Operation Sankalp: Indian Navy's Gulf security deployment since 2019

Indian Ocean: 70.56 million sq km; ~75% of world's seaborne oil trade

Sources: [Hindustan Times](#), [Indian Navy](#)

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