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IONS Maritime Exercise 2026 – India's Chairmanship and the Indo- Pacific Security Architecture

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✍ WHY IN NEWS

India hosted the **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) Maritime Exercise** at the Maritime Warfare Centre, Kochi, with 12 member nations participating — the first major exercise under India's **IONS Chairmanship for 2026–2028**, assumed after a 16-year gap.

WHAT IS IONS?

The **Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)** is a voluntary, inclusive forum for naval cooperation among the navies of littoral states bordering the Indian Ocean. It was **conceptualised and initiated by India** in 2008 during a conclave of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) naval chiefs hosted in New Delhi under the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sureesh Mehta.

IONS — Core Architecture

- **Type:** Non-binding, consensus-based forum (not a treaty organisation)
- **Members:** ~24 navies of IOR littoral states
- **Chairmanship:** Rotates every two years among member navies
- **Working Groups:** IONS operates through three Working Groups:
 - Working Group 1 (WG1): Information Sharing and Interoperability
 - Working Group 2 (WG2): Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)
 - Working Group 3 (WG3): Piracy and Maritime Security

India’s IONS Chairmanship History

PERIOD	CHAIR
2008–2010	India (founding chair)
2010–2012	UAE
...	Various member navies
2026–2028	India (second time, after 16-year gap)

THE MARCH 2026 EXERCISE — DETAILS

Participating Nations (12)

Bangladesh, France, Indonesia, Kenya, Maldives, Mauritius, Myanmar, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Timor-Leste

Note: France’s inclusion reflects its Indian Ocean territories — Reunion Island and Mayotte.

Exercise Venue

Maritime Warfare Centre (MWC), Kochi — India's premier naval warfare training and simulation facility under the Southern Naval Command.

Scenarios Practised

- 1 **Counter-piracy:** Coordination of naval assets to interdict piracy in the Gulf of Aden / Somali coast corridors
- 2 **Human trafficking interdiction:** Stopping illegal movement of persons through Indian Ocean sea lanes
- 3 **HADR coordination:** Simulated disaster response (cyclone / tsunami) with multi-navy coordination protocols
- 4 **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):** Information sharing exercises using AIS (Automatic Identification System) and coordinated patrol grids

INDIA'S STRATEGIC POSTURE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The SAGAR Doctrine

Prime Minister Modi articulated India's Indian Ocean vision as **SAGAR — Security and Growth for All in the Region** during his visit to Mauritius in March 2015. SAGAR envisions India as:

- The **net security provider** for the IOR
- A partner, not a hegemon — security through cooperation, not coercion
- Committed to a **rules-based international order at sea**

Indo-Pacific and IONS

The IONS exercise reflects India's broader **Indo-Pacific strategy**, which recognises that the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are a single strategic theatre. Key elements:

- **Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP):** India supports unimpeded maritime commerce
- **Quad Connectivity:** Complementary to IONS — while QUAD addresses strategic competition with China, IONS addresses cooperative security challenges
- **IFC-IOR:** India's **Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region** (established 2018, Gurugram) serves as the nerve centre for maritime domain awareness — a key IONS information-sharing node

NON-TRADITIONAL MARITIME SECURITY THREATS

The IONS exercise focuses on **non-traditional threats** — distinct from traditional naval warfare:

THREAT	SCALE	INDIA'S ROLE
Piracy	Gulf of Aden; Strait of Malacca	INS deployments under Operation Sankalp; Combined Maritime Forces
IUU Fishing	Entire IOR	Patrol and MDA coordination
Drug trafficking	Sea routes from Afghanistan/Myanmar	Coordinated interdiction with NCB
Human trafficking	Gulf corridor; Bay of Bengal	Rescue operations under HADR
Climate disasters	Cyclone, tsunami, flooding	HADR exercises; NDRF deployment

CONSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNANCE ANGLE

India's maritime security responsibilities derive from:

- **UNCLOS (1982):** Ratified by India in 1995 — defines EEZ (200 nautical miles), Continental Shelf rights, and transit passage rules in straits
- **Maritime Zones of India Act, 1981:** Domestic legislation implementing UNCLOS provisions
- **Indian Navy Act, 1957 (amended):** Legal framework for naval operations

India's maritime zones:

- Territorial Waters: 12 nautical miles
- Contiguous Zone: 24 nautical miles
- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): 200 nautical miles (~2.37 million sq km)
- Continental Shelf: Up to 350 nautical miles (where applicable)

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: IONS — founded 2008 by India; Chairmanship 2026–2028; 12 participating nations in Kochi exercise; SAGAR doctrine 2015; IFC-IOR (2018, Gurugram).

Mains GS-2 (IR): India's maritime diplomacy; Indo-Pacific strategy; India as net security provider; IONS as soft power instrument; QUAD vs. IONS — complementary or competitive?

Mains GS-3 (Security): Non-traditional maritime security threats; counter-piracy; HADR capacity; blue-water navy aspirations; Operation Sankalp.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

IONS — COMPLETE REFERENCE:

Founded: 2008; initiated by India (naval chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta)

Type: Voluntary, consensus-based, non-treaty forum

Total member navies: ~24 IOR littoral states

India's Chairmanship: 2008–2010 (founding); 2026–2028 (current)

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

Participants in March 2026 exercise: 12 nations

Working Groups: WG1 (Info sharing), WG2 (HADR), WG3 (Piracy/Security)

SAGAR AND IFC-IOR:

SAGAR doctrine: March 2015, announced by PM Modi in Mauritius

IFC-IOR: Information Fusion Centre for IOR; established 2018; Gurugram, Haryana

IFC-IOR mission: Real-time maritime domain awareness; collaborative white shipping information sharing

INDIAN OCEAN KEY DATA:

Indian Ocean: ~70.56 million sq km (3rd largest ocean)

~75% of world's seaborne oil trade passes through IOR

India's EEZ: ~2.37 million sq km

Chokepoints: Strait of Hormuz (Persian Gulf), Strait of Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb, Cape of Good Hope

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982); India ratified 1995

Operation Sankalp: India's naval deployment in Gulf of Oman (2019–present) for maritime security

Combined Maritime Forces (CMF): 34-nation naval partnership; HQ Bahrain; India is a partner (not full member)

India's naval fleet (2026): ~140+ warships including INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant (2 aircraft carriers)

Sources: [Indian Navy](#), [PIB](#), [GKToday](#)

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