

Maritime safety and security is of primordial importance to Indian Ocean Region: Secretary-General

Any disruption in the Indian Ocean will have a deep impact on the economy across the region, says Sanjiv Ranjan, Secretary-General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association; war in West Asia overshadows India's agenda for IORA summit next year, marking 30 years of the grouping

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The Secretary General of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Sanjiv Ranjan, speaks during an interview in New Delhi on May 7, 2026. | Photo Credit: Shiv Kumar Pushpakar

Navigating maritime security in the wake of the war in West Asia will be at the top of the agenda as India chairs the 23-nation Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with a



leaders' summit expected next year, said the organisation's Secretary-General Sanjiv Ranjan.

In addition to raising the profile of the IORA, the government is expected to focus on the specific challenges arising from the war in West Asia, including the violence in the region and the Hormuz Strait blockades by Iran and the U.S.

Last week, Mr. Ranjan had co-hosted the Indian Ocean Dialogue in Delhi, which was attended by Ministers from India, Mauritius and Yemen, besides representatives from both Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Speaking to *The Hindu*, he said while bilateral differences are not discussed at the grouping, the Gulf war has raised issues of "primordial importance" for the IOR countries.

"The increasing realisation from the contemporary situation is that maritime safety and security are of primordial importance for our energy security, our food security, [and] many livelihoods, which are involved as a result of the developments in Indian Ocean littoral areas," he said, referring to all countries with coastlines on the Indian Ocean, ranging from the East coast of Africa to Australia.

Delivering a keynote address to the two-day dialogue, Mauritius Foreign Minister Dhananjay Ramful said that the "ideal of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace" has been negated as "war has come" to the ocean. Mr. Ramful called the U.S.'s sinking of the Iranian naval ship *IRIS Dena*, in which 100 sailors were killed in March, as "outrageous" and also expressed concern over retaliatory Iranian missile attacks using Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) on the U.S.'s Diego Garcia base situated on the Mauritius's Chagos Islands.

"They might not have reached their target, but they have nonetheless breached our comfortable status quo. They have introduced in our region of the Indian Ocean an intent of aggression hitherto unknown," Mr. Ramful added.

According to the IORA charter, "bilateral and other issues likely to generate controversy and be an impediment to regional co-operation efforts will be excluded from deliberations". However, they will discuss the "socio-economic" impact of the conflict in talks on eight priority areas: maritime safety and security, trade and investment, fisheries management, disaster risk management, tourism, cultural exchanges, blue economy and women's economic empowerment, Mr. Ranjan said.

“Without a doubt, any disruption in the Indian Ocean will have a deep impact on the economy across the region. The tourism sector is affected badly, especially due to airline disruptions. Fuel prices in many of our member countries have increased considerably; some have had to shut down offices and schools. In the long term, inflation, agricultural output and productivity — impacted due to fertilizer shortages — will all hurt the region. A big worry is that [due to the war] situations where fishermen are unable to go out to sea for fishing will affect livelihoods,” Mr. Ranjan told *The Hindu*.

The IORA Summit in 2027 will mark the organisation’s 30th anniversary, said Mr. Ranjan, adding that the last time such a summit had been held was in 2017, when Indonesia marked the IORA’s 20th anniversary in Jakarta. In the run-up to that, India will host the Senior Officials Meeting in June this year, while the IORA Council of Ministers will meet towards the end of 2026.

The Indian Ocean Dialogue, which was a “track 1.5” conference for officials, academics and experts, co-hosted by the IORA and the Ministry of External Affairs and organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), kicked off a series of meetings expected over the coming year, as India seeks to recharge the IORA. The grouping was formed in 1997 with former South African leader Nelson Mandela amongst those leading it. However, the IORA has not received the relevance that other regional groupings have, such as the now-defunct SAARC, BIMSTEC, SCO or Quad, over three decades. In addition to its salience in India’s MAHASAGAR maritime policy and Indo-Pacific strategy, the IORA is less contentious for India as Pakistan has never been admitted to its ranks, although the IORA charter opens membership to all “sovereign states of the Indian Ocean Rim”. Pakistan had requested membership in the early 2000s, but the fact that it refused to grant India “MFN status” for trade violated the IORA charter that calls for “sovereign equality” or equal treatment of all states, according to officials.

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) currently comprises 23 member states, including Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

In addition, the association is supported by 12 dialogue partners, which include China, Egypt, the European Union, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

