Syllabus subtopic: Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings and Agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests.

Prelims and Mains focus: about the move and its significance; about IOC

News: India has joined as an observer of the Indian Ocean Commission.

About the move

With this, India joins China, which was made an observer in 2016, as well as the “International Organisation of the Francophonie” or the 54-nation French-speaking collective, the European Union (EU) and Malta, which were all admitted in 2017.

Background

- The decision to join the IOC marks a part of the government’s push for greater salience in the whole Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including what is called the Western or African Indian Ocean.

- In December 2019, the Ministry of External Affairs decided to include Madagascar, Comoros and Reunion as part of the IOR desk along with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles.

- Subsequently, they have been incorporated into one single division under the additional Secretary (Indo-Pacific).

Significance of the move

- The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) is a strategic sub-theatre of the Indian Ocean linking the Southeastern coast of Africa to the wider Indian Ocean and beyond. It is home to one of the key chokepoints in the Indian Ocean - the Mozambique Channel.
This move has strategic importance as the Commission is an important regional institution in the Western Indian Ocean. It facilitates collective engagement with the islands in Western Indian Ocean that are becoming strategically significant. It boosts cooperation with France that has strong presence in the Western Indian Ocean and lends depth to India’s SAGAR policy of PM Modi 2015.

The move also strengthens western flank of the Indo-Pacific and is a stepping stone to security cooperation with East Africa.

While Comoros sits at the northern mouth of the Mozambique Channel, Madagascar borders the channel to its west. While the channel lost its significance post the opening of the Suez Canal, the recent hostilities near the Strait of Hormuz brought the channel back into focus as the original route for bigger commercial vessels (especially for oil tankers).

Additionally, the growing importance of Africa in Indo-Pacific engagements combined with potential natural gas reserves in the Mozambique Channel will only continue to raise the significance of this region in wider maritime security. Keeping in mind the importance of geography for maritime power projection and naval dominance, there is little doubt about the rising significance of the islands in a new geo-political environment in the Indian Ocean.

About IOC

The Indian Ocean Commission is an inter-governmental organisation that coordinates maritime governance in the south-western Indian Ocean.

It was created in 1982 at Port Louis, Mauritius and institutionalized in 1984 by the Victoria Agreement in Seychelles.

The COI is composed of five African Indian Ocean nations: Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion (an overseas region of France), and Seychelles.
Notwithstanding their different characteristics (Réunion as a French overseas region; Mauritius and Seychelles as Middle-Income Countries whereas Comoros and Madagascar are amongst the Least-Developed Countries), the five islands share geographic proximity, historical and demographic relationships, natural resources and common development issues.

The COI works on four pillars which have been adopted in 2005 by the Summit of Heads of States:

- Political and diplomatic cooperation,
- Economic and commercial cooperation
- Sustainable development in a globalisation context, cooperation in the field of agriculture, maritime fishing, and the conservation of resources and ecosystems
- Strengthening of the regional cultural identity, cooperation in cultural, scientific, technical, educational and judicial fields.