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Q4(c)

What is UNCLOS? Explain its salient features

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2026 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Comparative Politics

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Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

DEMAND

- Define **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** as the constitutional framework for oceans
- Explain its salient maritime zones and regulatory mechanisms

REVISION MAP

- **UNCLOS**, established in 1982, serves as the constitution of the oceans, codifying customary international law regarding maritime jurisdictions. Its salient features include distinct maritime zones ranging from territorial waters to the high seas, balancing coastal state sovereignty with freedom of navigation. It establishes compulsory dispute settlement mechanisms through institutions like **ITLOS**. The convention also mandates environmental protection and sustainable management of marine resources. For India, **UNCLOS** provides a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific while respecting navigational rights. It remains central to addressing contemporary maritime security and resource challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**, adopted in 1982, establishes a comprehensive legal framework for all ocean space, balancing national sovereignty with common heritage principles. Often termed the constitution of the oceans, it codifies maritime zones and governance mechanisms to ensure peaceful uses of seas.

BODY**Maritime Zones**

UNCLOS establishes a graduated regime of maritime jurisdictions extending seaward from the coastal baseline.

- **Territorial Sea:** Extends up to 12 nautical miles where coastal states exercise full sovereignty, subject to the right of innocent passage.
- **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ):** Extends up to 200 nautical miles, granting coastal states sovereign rights over exploration, exploitation, and conservation of natural resources.

- **High Seas:** Designated as areas beyond national jurisdiction, governed by the principle of *res communis* and open to all states for peaceful purposes.

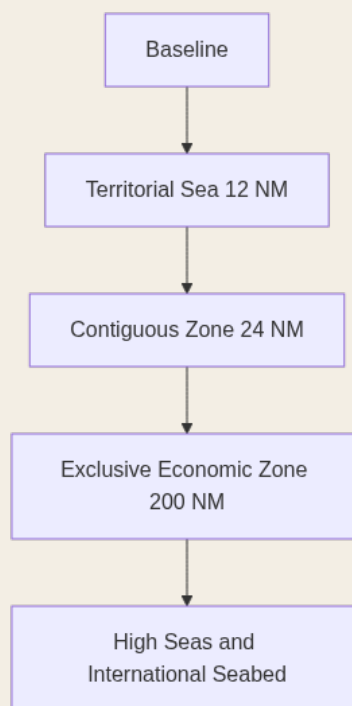
Dispute Settlement

- **Compulsory Procedures:** Part XV of **UNCLOS** provides binding dispute resolution through the **International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)**, the International Court of Justice, or arbitral tribunals.
- **Rule of Law:** Provides a predictable mechanism to resolve overlapping maritime claims and boundary delimitations peacefully.

Marine Conservation

- **Environmental Mandate:** Imposes strict obligations on states to protect and preserve the marine environment from pollution and overexploitation.
- **Area-Based Management:** Regulates activities in the international seabed area, designated as the common heritage of mankind.

Flow diagram



CONCLUSION

UNCLOS remains the bedrock of global maritime governance, ensuring that oceanic commons are managed through multilateralism rather than unilateral power assertions. Upholding its provisions aligns with India's vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and a free, open Indo-Pacific.

FACTS & FIGURES

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

Adopted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994, establishing the legal order for the seas.

International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)

An independent judicial body established by UNCLOS to adjudicate disputes arising out of the interpretation and application of the Convention.

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