

India's Maritime Vision: from SAGAR to Indo-Pacific to MAHASAGAR

A decade ago, on 12 March 2015, while commissioning in Mauritius the gleaming Offshore Patrol Vessel Barracuda, built in Garden Reach, Kolkata to Mauritian specifications, Prime Minister Modi outlined India's policy towards the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region. The Indian Ocean, he pointed out, was critical to the future of the world bearing two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one third of its bulk cargo and half of its container traffic. The forty states that are on its littoral host nearly 40% of the world's population.

SAGAR policy emphasized five aspects: safety and security of the Indian mainland and island territories and ensuring a safe, secure and stable IOR; deepen economic and security cooperation with friends in the IOR particularly maritime neighbours and island states through capacity building; collective action and cooperation; seek a more integrated and cooperative future towards sustainable development for all; and increased maritime engagement in the IOR as the primary responsibility for the stability and prosperity of IOR lay with those living in the region. If SAGAR was the external outreach of India, in the national context it was complemented by the Sagarmala port-led development initiative.

For long, India has been criticized for its continental bias, that it was focused on its northern and north west frontiers to the neglect of its vast maritime interests. However, this has been changing. Since the launch of its Look East policy in 1992 which evolved into the proactive Act East policy in 2015, India has reclaimed its maritime legacy. PM Modi recently released a special coin commemorating 1000 years of Emperor Rajendra Chola's naval achievements.

The Indian navy has been in the forefront of maritime diplomacy through capacity building initiatives, joint exercises, plurilateral conferences, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Search and Rescue (SAR) activities. The 2004 Tsunami established India's credentials in disaster relief operations. India came to be recognized as the first responder and net security provider in the IOR, particularly to states in its neighborhood. India's prompt assistance to Myanmar in the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and being the first country to deliver drinking water to the Maldives after a freshwater crisis in that country in end 2014 consolidated that image. In March, 2025 India mounted a huge relief and rescue Operation Brahma to earthquake hit Myanmar.

India has now graduated to becoming a *preferred security partner* in the Indo-Pacific region forming defence partnerships that not only include joint exercises and capacity building but also exports of defence equipment either as a grant or under a defence Line of Credit at the request of the partner state.

Trilateral maritime security cooperation with Sri Lanka and Maldives which began in 2011, has extended to other Indian Ocean states including Mauritius and Bangladesh with Seychelles as observer under the Colombo Security Conclave that now has a charter and a secretariat in Colombo. The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) which began as an initiative of the Indian navy in 2008 is an inclusive platform to discuss maritime issues and to work out effective response mechanisms. IONS has 25 participating countries from South Asia, West Asia, Africa, southeast Asia and European countries with Indian Ocean territories as well as nine observers and a rotating chair (India will take over as chair, at the end of 2025). MILAN is a biennial multinational exercise hosted by Indian navy in harmony with India's vision of SAGAR and Act East policy.

A crucial facet of maritime security is enhanced maritime domain awareness. Towards this, India has also been pursuing white shipping agreements with several countries (22 have been concluded till now) and established a state-of-the-art Information Fusion Centre (IFC – IOR) in Gurugram that facilitates sharing of maritime information among member states.

India has a long history of development partnership going back to the period prior to its Independence. Its approach to development partnership has been shaped by its independence struggle, solidarity with other colonized and developing countries and the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who declared that "my patriotism includes the good of mankind in general". It is thus that India has been sharing its developmental experiences and technical expertise in a spirit of *Vasudhaivaikutumbakam* (the ancient belief that the World is One Family). As PM Modi stated in his address to the Ugandan Parliament in 2018, "Our developmental partnership will be guided by your priorities, it will be on terms that will be comfortable for you, that will liberate your potential and not constrain your future..." The Indian model of developmental cooperation is comprehensive and involves multiple instruments including grant-in-aid, concessional lines of credit, capacity building and technical assistance. Above all, it is unconditional, transparent, sustainable and financially viable.

In June, 2018 at the Shangri La conference, PM Modi outlined India's Indo-Pacific vision. For India, the Indo-Pacific stands for a free, open, inclusive region that "embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity". He emphasized ASEAN centrality, a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. There is great synergy between the Indian approach and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In November 2019 at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, India launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) a coherent initiative comprising seven pillars of practical cooperation built on the SAGAR vision. India's active participation in the QUAD (Australia, India, Japan and US) is part of our Indo-Pacific vision. Earlier, in 2014, India established FIPIC (Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation), a strategic initiative for strengthening diplomatic and economic engagement with islands in the Pacific ocean.

It was in 2023, during India's presidency of G-20, whose leitmotif was inclusivity, that the African Union was invited to join the grouping. India's presidency, inter alia, revived multilateralism, amplified the voice of the global south and championed development. India has hosted three editions of the Voice of the Global South summit since then.

Ten years after SAGAR, during an official visit to Mauritius in 2025, PM Modi announced MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), an updated doctrine. If SAGAR is the sea, then MAHASAGAR denotes 'ocean' in Hindi and several other Indian languages. MAHASAGAR marks a strategic evolution from a regional focus on the Indian Ocean to a global maritime vision, with particular emphasis on the global south. PM Modi's recent engagements with Mauritius, Maldives, Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana and now the Philippines are aligned with the MAHASAGAR vision.

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