IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

# Maritime Multilateralism and Strategic Outreach:

## Analysing India's Journey from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

**Nourin Siddique**

Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Political Science

Diamond Harbour Women's University (DHWU), South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India

Abstract: India's maritime foreign policy has passed through several distinct phases over the past decade — from the focused regionalism of the SAGAR doctrine (2015), through the globally framed Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (2019), to the ambitious multilateralism of MAHASAGAR (2025). Each phase represented not a repudiation of what came before but a deliberate broadening of strategic scope, driven by a changing geopolitical environment, India's own growing material capabilities, and the accumulated lessons of a decade of oceanic statecraft. This article traces that evolution in depth. Beginning with Prime Minister Modi's Mauritius address of 12 March 2015, it examines how SAGAR crystallised India's long-neglected maritime identity into a coherent five-point doctrine of regional security and cooperative development. It traces SAGAR's operational record across bilateral capacity-building partnerships, multilateral naval platforms, and humanitarian deployments, while interrogating the structural constraints — around financing, institutional depth, and Chinese counter-positioning — that limited its reach. The article then analyses the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative as a doctrinal bridge, before examining MAHASAGAR — formally, Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions — as a genuinely global reformulation of India's maritime purpose. Drawing on diplomatic analysis by serving and former ambassadors, the coverage of MILAN 2026, peer-reviewed scholarship, and primary policy documents, the article argues that the SAGAR-to-MAHASAGAR transition reflects a state learning to translate civilisational maritime heritage into durable twenty-first-century statecraft.

**Keywords:** SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, Indian Ocean Region, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, maritime multilateralism, MILAN 2026, Colombo Security Conclave, blue economy, Global South, India's foreign policy

## 1. Introduction

There is something revealing about the fact that India's most consequential maritime strategic declaration of the twenty-first century was made not from the dais of a Delhi conference hall but from a quayside in the Indian Ocean. On 12 March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood at the commissioning ceremony of INS Barracuda in Port Louis, Mauritius — an offshore patrol vessel built in Garden Reach, Kolkata to Mauritius's own operational specifications — and announced what would become India's foundational maritime doctrine: SAGAR, or Security and Growth for All in the Region (Durai, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2015). The choice of setting was as important as the words spoken. By articulating a regional maritime vision from the smallest and most vulnerable of India's Indian Ocean neighbours, Modi was reaching simultaneously outward to every littoral state in

the ocean and inward to an Indian strategic community that had long allowed a continental mindset to crowd out the country's maritime inheritance.

That inheritance is ancient and formidable. Long before European mariners claimed the Indian Ocean as their domain, the Indian subcontinent had sustained one of history's most consequential maritime civilisations — a civilisation whose reach was attested not only in the archaeological record but in the living cultural traces of Sanskrit, Hinduism, and Hindu-Buddhist statecraft across Southeast Asia. It was only after independence, paradoxically, that India turned its back on the sea. Preoccupied with land borders, continental neighbours, and the legacies of a partition that had redrawn its western frontier in blood, successive Indian governments starved the navy of resources, neglected coastal surveillance, and treated the Indian Ocean as a zone of inherited influence rather than active strategic management. K. M. Pannikkar's warning — written in 1951 — that India's future would be decided at sea went unheeded for nearly half a century (Pannikkar, 1951).

A series of catalysts reversed that drift. The Look East policy of 1992, which evolved into the more proactive Act East policy in 2015, began reclaiming India's maritime inheritance and connecting the country's strategic imagination to Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific (Durai, 2025). The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami established India's credentials as the region's first responder and net security provider, dispatching naval assets to affected coastlines before any other country had mobilised. India's prompt relief operations following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, its emergency delivery of drinking water to the Maldives following a freshwater crisis in late 2014, and the March 2025 Operation Brahma relief mission to earthquake-hit Myanmar each reinforced that standing (Durai, 2025). By the time SAGAR was announced, India was already a consequential maritime actor; the doctrine gave that activity a name, a normative architecture, and a coherent public purpose.

A decade on, India's maritime evolution has continued at a pace that even the architects of SAGAR might not have fully anticipated. MAHASAGAR — Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions — announced by Modi during his 2025 official visit to Mauritius, marks a qualitative shift from the Indian Ocean Region to a truly global maritime vision, with the Global South as its defining constituency (Durai, 2025). The MILAN naval exercise, hosting 72 nations in 2026, the Colombo Security Conclave with its new secretariat in Colombo, India's 22 white shipping agreements, the Information Fusion Centre in Gurugram, and Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic engagements with Mauritius, Maldives, Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana and the Philippines — all signal that India's maritime reach has expanded well beyond the Indian Ocean that SAGAR originally addressed (Durai, 2025; Kumari, 2026).

This article examines the full arc of that evolution. It proceeds in eight sections: a theoretical grounding; a close reading of SAGAR and its five pillars; an account of SAGAR's operational record; an analysis of the Indo-Pacific bridge between SAGAR and MAHASAGAR; an examination of SAGAR's structural limits; a detailed analysis of MAHASAGAR's architecture; a comparative assessment; and a conclusion. The argument developed throughout is that India's maritime trajectory represents one of the most sustained and purposeful exercises in strategic multilateralism conducted by any middle power in the early twenty-first century — and that understanding it fully requires situating doctrinal texts within the operational and diplomatic reality that gave them life.

## 2. Theoretical Framing: Sea Power, Collective Security, and Strategic Multilateralism

The intellectual lineage behind India's maritime doctrines draws from at least three distinct scholarly traditions, and holding them together — rather than privileging one at the expense of the others — is essential to understanding what SAGAR and MAHASAGAR are actually trying to accomplish. The first and oldest of these is Mahanian sea-power theory, which holds that national greatness is ultimately a function of naval strength and commercial maritime primacy (Mahan, 1890). Alfred Thayer Mahan's insight that the control of key oceanic chokepoints determines relative great-power standing retains analytical bite in the contemporary Indian Ocean: the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca together constitute an arterial system through which much of the world economy breathes. India's geographic centrality in the Indian Ocean — straddling the main sea lanes between the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Malacca — gives it a natural structural advantage that SAGAR's architects were the first to systematically leverage.

But pure Mahanian logic — one state dominating key maritime spaces — captures only a fraction of what India has been attempting. Contemporary maritime security scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that the most significant threats to Indian Ocean stability are not state navies but diffuse, non-state, and transnational phenomena: piracy along the Somali coast, drug trafficking through the Arabian Sea, illegal and unreported fishing across the Bay of Bengal, and cyber intrusions targeting port infrastructure (Herbert-Burns, 2007). These threats cannot be managed unilaterally and require the kind of information-sharing arrangements, interoperable procedures, and institutionalised trust that only multilateral frameworks can generate over time. This second theoretical tradition — collective maritime security — lies at the heart of IONS, the Colombo Security Conclave, and the white shipping agreement network that have accumulated under SAGAR's umbrella.

A third theoretical strand concerns normative order. Hedley Bull's foundational argument that international society is constituted not only by material power but by shared institutions and norms — a rules-based order in contemporary shorthand — has direct expression in both SAGAR and MAHASAGAR's consistent invocation of UNCLOS, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute settlement (Bull, 1977). India's normative advocacy is not merely rhetorical: it constitutes a deliberate attempt to shape the legal and political environment of the Indian Ocean in ways that constrain Chinese revisionism and reassure smaller states that India's growing power is self-limiting in character. C. Raja Mohan's (2012) concept of India's 'samudra manthan' — a churning of the seas reflecting New Delhi's willingness to compete for normative as well as material primacy — captures this dimension well.

The analytical concept that synthesises these strands most productively is strategic multilateralism: the deliberate construction and maintenance of multilateral platforms as instruments of national influence. Strategic multilateralism is distinct from pure multilateralism, which subordinates national interests to collective outcomes, and from straightforward bilateralism, which ignores the systemic effects of multiple simultaneous engagements. It describes a posture in which a state pursues strategic influence through multilateral architecture precisely because doing so builds legitimacy, reduces per-unit diplomatic costs, and creates self-sustaining governance structures resilient to political disruption. India's maritime strategy since 2015 — with its overlapping web of bilateral partnerships, plurilateral exercises, information-sharing arrangements, and institutional platforms — is the most extended application of strategic multilateralism that any South Asian state has yet attempted.

# 3. SAGAR: Doctrine, Architecture, and Historical Significance

## 3.1 Overcoming the Continental Bias

Any serious account of SAGAR must begin with the structural problem it was designed to address: India's long-standing continental bias. For decades after independence, India's strategic culture was overwhelmingly oriented toward its northern and northwestern land frontiers — the borders with Pakistan and China that had been contested in wars (1947, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1999) and that generated the bulk of defence procurement, military doctrine, and political attention. The navy received a fraction of the defence budget commanded by the army, coastal infrastructure was neglected, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands — strategically positioned at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca — were governed at a distance that reflected their marginal place in the national security imagination (Durai, 2025).

The Look East policy of 1992 began shifting that orientation, reconnecting India's strategic interest to Southeast Asia and the sea lanes that linked it to the wider Indo-Pacific. Modi's elevation of Look East into Act East in 2015 accelerated the reorientation, embedding maritime engagement more explicitly in India's diplomatic and commercial priorities. A particularly evocative gesture came when Prime Minister Modi released a special commemorative coin marking a thousand years since Emperor Rajendra Chola's naval campaigns across the Bay of Bengal and into Southeast Asia — a conscious symbolic act reconnecting contemporary policy to a maritime heritage that predated European intrusion by centuries (Durai, 2025). SAGAR was, in part, the doctrinal expression of this civilisational reclamation.

## 3.2 The Five Pillars of SAGAR

The substantive content of SAGAR rested on five propositions articulated in Modi's Mauritius address and elaborated in subsequent ministerial speeches at the Second and Third Indian Ocean Conferences (MEA, 2015; Padmaja, 2018). The first was national-cum-regional security: India would safeguard its own mainland and island territories while working to ensure a safe, stable, and secure Indian Ocean for all littoral states. The second was cooperative capacity-building: India would deepen economic and security cooperation with maritime neighbours and assist in building their capabilities through training, equipment provision, coastal surveillance infrastructure, and information-sharing. The third was collective institutional action through mechanisms like IONS and the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives Trilateral. The fourth was sustainable development through the blue economy — a domain that Modi symbolically linked to the blue chakra on India's national flag. The fifth, and perhaps most politically significant, was the principle that littoral states bore the primary responsibility for the Indian Ocean's stability — a formulation that simultaneously asserted India's regional leadership and distinguished its posture from extra-regional powers (Padmaja, 2018; MEA, 2015).

As the doctrine's domestic complement, Sagarmala — a port-led development programme launched in 2016 — sought to harness India's own twelve-thousand-kilometre coastline for economic transformation, linking port infrastructure investment to manufacturing clusters, logistics corridors, and coastal employment generation. Sagarmala thus extended SAGAR's logic inward: the same maritime orientation that drove India's regional diplomacy was to reshape its domestic economic geography as well (Durai, 2025).

## 3.3 SAGAR as Normative Counter-Narrative

Understood against the background of China's Belt and Road Initiative, SAGAR was also — if never quite explicitly — a normative argument about what good regional development looked like. India's model, as articulated by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar at the fourth Indian Ocean Conference and analysed subsequently by Ambassador Suchitra Durai (2025), was 'consultative, democratic, and equitable' — shaped by partner priorities, free of conditionality, transparent in its terms, and financially viable for recipient states. This contrasted deliberately with what critics were beginning to identify as BRI's neo-tributary dynamics: the Hambantota port lease, the Gwadar enclave, the Colombo port city — all investments that came with commercial and strategic strings that smaller states had not always fully appreciated at the moment of signing (Lukaszuk, 2024).

India's developmental philosophy, as Durai (2025) traces it, runs deeper than tactical competition with China. It draws on a long tradition of South-South solidarity shaped by the independence struggle, the Non-Aligned Movement, and Gandhi's declaration that 'my patriotism includes the good of mankind in general.' Prime Minister Modi's 2018 address to the Ugandan Parliament crystallised this philosophy for the contemporary era: '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' (Durai, 2025). The invocation of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — the ancient Indian principle that the world is one family — as a guiding value of India's development partnerships placed SAGAR's capacity-building model within a civilisational ethics as well as a strategic logic.

## 4. SAGAR in Practice: Institutions, Exercises, and Humanitarian Reach

### 4.1 The Colombo Security Conclave and Institutional Deepening

Among SAGAR's most consequential institutional legacies is the evolution of the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives Trilateral, established in 2011, into the Colombo Security Conclave. As Durai (2025) documents, what began as a three-way maritime security arrangement expanded to include Mauritius and Bangladesh, with Seychelles joining as observer. More significantly, the Conclave has graduated from an ad hoc diplomatic forum into a genuinely institutionalised body with its own charter and a secretariat established in Colombo — a development that marks a qualitative advance in the durability of India-centred maritime security architecture. The Conclave now addresses the full spectrum of non-traditional security threats — terrorism, trafficking, piracy, smuggling, cyber intrusions — that no bilateral partnership can manage effectively in isolation.

IONS, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium that India had initiated in 2008, expanded steadily over the SAGAR decade to encompass 25 participating countries drawn from South Asia, West Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, and European states with Indian Ocean territories, plus nine observers operating under a rotating chairmanship (Durai, 2025). India's assumption of the IONS chair at the end of 2025 was both an expression of its growing institutional centrality and a responsibility that would shape its maritime diplomacy into the MAHASAGAR period. Together, the Conclave and IONS represent the hard institutional infrastructure that distinguishes the decade's maritime engagement from the rhetorical declarations that preceded SAGAR.

### 4.2 Maritime Domain Awareness: White Shipping and the IFC-IOR

A crucial and often underappreciated dimension of SAGAR's implementation has been the patient construction of maritime domain awareness infrastructure. India has concluded white shipping agreements — arrangements for sharing Automatic Identification System data on commercial vessel movements — with 22 countries, creating a regional information network that allows partner states to monitor traffic in their own waters far more effectively than any single navy could achieve alone (Durai, 2025). The centrepiece of this network is the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in Gurugram, which serves as a multilateral information hub facilitating real-time maritime data sharing among member states. These technical arrangements may lack the visibility of naval exercises or landmark diplomatic declarations, but they constitute the connective tissue of regional maritime governance — the infrastructure on which operational cooperation ultimately depends.

### 4.3 Island State Partnerships and HADR Credentials

India's capacity-building partnerships with small island states during the SAGAR decade built on a track record of humanitarian first response that predated the doctrine and gave it credibility. The 2004 tsunami had established India as the region's most capable first responder; the 2008 Cyclone Nargis relief mission to Myanmar and the emergency freshwater delivery to the Maldives in late 2014 deepened that reputation (Durai, 2025). In Seychelles, coastal surveillance radars, Dornier maritime aircraft, and development transfers — including a solar power plant and a magistrate building — combined security assistance with development support in the integrated fashion that SAGAR's design intended (JSTOR, 2021). In Mauritius, the OPV Barracuda was followed by a five-hundred-million-

dollar soft credit line for civil maritime infrastructure, demonstrating that India's partnerships were backed by financial commitment rather than rhetorical aspiration alone (Lukaszuk, 2024).

India's graduation from humanitarian responder to preferred security partner is captured in a distinction that Durai (2025) makes explicit: India now exports defence equipment, either as grants or under defence Lines of Credit at the request of partner states, in addition to providing training and joint exercise participation. This shift from capacity-building to co-production of security reflects a fundamental change in India's positioning — from a benevolent regional power that helps smaller states to a genuine strategic partner that works with them as near-equals. The March 2025 Operation Brahma — India's large-scale relief and rescue operation to earthquake-hit Myanmar — exemplified the reach and speed that this upgraded capability enables.

### 4.4 MILAN 2026: Three Decades of Convergence

No single platform captures SAGAR's maritime multilateralism more vividly than the MILAN naval exercise. First conducted in 1995 under the Andaman Command as a modest confidence-building forum for regional navies, MILAN — whose name embodies the Hindi word for 'confluence' or 'friendly assembly' — has grown over three decades into one of the world's most significant multilateral naval events (Kumari, 2026). By the 13th edition, conducted between 15 and 25 February 2026, participation had reached 72 nations — up from 42 countries at the previous edition in 2022 (Kumari, 2026). The exercise had also moved from the Andaman Islands to Visakhapatnam, where it was anchored by INS Vikrant, India's domestically built aircraft carrier.

The significance of this shift runs deeper than geography. Centring MILAN 2026 on INS Vikrant communicated India's strategic autonomy and defence manufacturing maturation to 72 nations' naval delegations simultaneously — an advertisement for indigenous capability that no diplomatic cable could replicate (Kumari, 2026). The exercise addressed not only conventional naval interoperability but non-traditional threats across the full MAHASAGAR spectrum: illegal fishing, maritime trafficking, cyber disruptions, and supply chain vulnerabilities. Seminars, harbour interactions, and professional exchanges built the human networks that ultimately sustain regional maritime governance far more effectively than formal treaty obligations. As Kumari (2026) observes in The Statesman, MILAN 2026 encapsulates three decades of India building itself as the 'net security provider in the region' — demonstrating that the Indian Ocean is not a governance vacuum but a domain of structured, multilateral engagement.

### 4.5 Mission Sagar and the COVID-19 Deployment

The COVID-19 pandemic provided SAGAR's most humanly resonant operational test. In 2020, under the explicit banner of Mission Sagar, India dispatched INS Kesari to Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, and Seychelles, carrying medical teams, pandemic medicines, and food consignments to communities whose normal supply chains had been fractured by lockdowns and border closures (JSTOR, 2021). That the mission was branded with SAGAR's own name was neither accidental nor trivial — it represented a conscious effort to accumulate normative capital by demonstrating, with visible naval assets in real time, that India's self-designation as the region's net security provider meant something concrete under conditions of actual regional distress.

## 5. The Indo-Pacific Bridge: From SAGAR to IPOI to MAHASAGAR

Between SAGAR's 2015 launch and MAHASAGAR's 2025 announcement lay a crucial doctrinal bridge: the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, or IPOI. Launched by Prime Minister Modi at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok in November 2019, the IPOI was explicitly described as a seven-pillar practical cooperation framework built upon the foundations of SAGAR and extended to the wider Indo-Pacific (Durai, 2025). Its seven pillars addressed maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity-building and maritime transport, disaster risk reduction, science, technology and academic cooperation, and trade connectivity — a comprehensive governance architecture that went considerably beyond SAGAR's primary security-development binary.

Modi had first outlined India's Indo-Pacific vision in June 2018 at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. His formulation — 'a free, open, inclusive region that embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity' — placed ASEAN centrality, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, and rule-of-law at the heart of India's Indo-Pacific positioning (Durai, 2025). The synergy between this vision and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was not coincidental: India had been careful to ensure that its expanding maritime ambitions were framed in terms consistent with ASEAN's preference for inclusive, non-bloc approaches to regional order.

India's Quad participation — alongside Australia, Japan, and the United States — sits alongside this ASEAN-compatible framing without displacing it. Durai (2025) presents Quad membership as an expression of India's Indo-Pacific vision rather than a departure from it, noting that the four countries share commitments to freedom of navigation, humanitarian assistance, and rules-based order that are consistent with SAGAR and MAHASAGAR's normative architecture. The 2014 establishment of FIPIC — the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation — extended India's engagement to Pacific island states even before IPOI formalised the Indo-Pacific framework, reflecting a geographic ambition that was already outrunning the SAGAR label's IOR-centric implications (Durai, 2025).

India's G-20 presidency of 2023 provided a further multilateral platform for advancing the normative agenda that connects SAGAR to MAHASAGAR. The invitation extended to the African Union to join the G-20 during India's presidency reflected the Global South emphasis that would become central to MAHASAGAR; the three Voice of the Global South summits that India hosted amplified developing-country perspectives on maritime governance and economic order in ways that positioned New Delhi as a credible broker between the developed world's security priorities and the development world's welfare concerns (Durai, 2025).

## 6. Structural Constraints: Where SAGAR Fell Short

### 6.1 The Financing Gap

The most persistently cited limitation on SAGAR's effectiveness was the mismatch between its ambitions and India's financial capacity relative to China's. BRI, mobilising hundreds of billions of dollars through state financial institutions, could offer Indian Ocean states the seductive combination of large-scale infrastructure financing, rapid implementation timelines, and minimal process conditionality. India's counterpart offerings were in several respects superior — more responsive to partner priorities, more transparent, more financially sustainable — but substantially smaller in scale (Lukaszuk, 2024). The Chabahar port development, long positioned as India's strategic answer to China's Gwadar, was caught for years in New Delhi's inter-ministerial machinery, its delays providing rivals with space to manoeuvre and recipient states with grounds for frustration (Gateway House, 2017). Without a credible, scalable financing architecture, SAGAR's partnerships remained dependent on diplomatic energy and bilateral goodwill rather than the structural interdependencies that transform strategic relationships into enduring ones.

### 6.2 Institutional Shallowness

SAGAR's institutional architecture, while more developed than anything India had previously assembled in the maritime domain, remained largely voluntary and consultative in character. IONS brought 25 navies together for discussion and exercise but carried no binding commitments; IORA served as a forum for civilian maritime cooperation but lacked the secretariat capacity to drive implementation; the Indian Ocean Conference generated intellectual exchange but no operational obligations. This voluntary character made the architecture resilient in that no state was forced to participate, but brittle in that cooperation depended on the sustained political will of each partner — a quality that proved unreliable when domestic politics in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, or Myanmar shifted (Padmaja, 2018). The Colombo Security Conclave's acquisition of a formal charter and secretariat represented a significant step toward the institutional durability that SAGAR's broader architecture lacked; but one institutionalised body does not compensate for systemic institutional shallowness across the whole governance landscape.

### 6.3 Chinese Counter-Positioning

The deepening of China's Indian Ocean presence through the SAGAR decade constituted the sharpest external challenge to the doctrine's logic. China's naval support facility in Djibouti, its regular submarine and surface deployments into the western Indian Ocean, and its accumulation of commercially significant — and potentially dual-use — port infrastructure across the IOR created a counter-architecture to SAGAR that operated on a far larger resource base and with greater strategic coordination (Brewster, 2014). China's normative counter-positioning was equally assertive, challenging freedom of navigation operations, advancing expansive interpretations of UNCLOS, and positioning itself as the champion of developing-country maritime interests against Western and Indian advocacy for rule-based ocean governance. India's non-confrontational framing of SAGAR, while prudent, sometimes made it harder to speak plainly to smaller states about the risks they were running by over-relying on Chinese infrastructure investment (The Guardian, 2023).

## 7. MAHASAGAR: A Global Maritime Vision for the Global South

### 7.1 The Announcement and Its Full Meaning

When Prime Minister Modi announced MAHASAGAR during his 2025 official visit to Mauritius — the same location where SAGAR had been launched exactly a decade earlier — the symmetry was too deliberate to be coincidental. Returning to Port Louis with a successor doctrine signalled both continuity with SAGAR's foundational commitments and the arrival of a genuinely new strategic moment. MAHASAGAR — Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions — carries within its full name a programmatic description of how the new doctrine advances beyond its predecessor: where SAGAR emphasised security and growth for those in the region, MAHASAGAR emphasises mutual advancement — a formulation that implies genuine reciprocity rather than India-led beneficence — and extends the geographic scope to regions, plural, rather than the single Indian Ocean region (Durai, 2025).

The Global South emphasis is MAHASAGAR's most distinctive new feature. Where SAGAR was primarily an Indian Ocean doctrine with Indo-Pacific extensions, MAHASAGAR explicitly positions itself as a framework for India's maritime engagement with the developing world as a whole. The diplomatic engagements Modi has conducted in MAHASAGAR's name — Mauritius, Maldives, Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana, the Philippines — map a geographic range that extends from the western Indian Ocean to the Caribbean, West Africa, and the western Pacific, tracing the contours of India's Global South ambition with considerable specificity (Durai, 2025; The Indian Express, 2025).

### 7.2 Institutional Advances and the Preferred Security Partner Role

MAHASAGAR's institutional architecture builds upon — and attempts to deepen — the structures that SAGAR created. The Colombo Security Conclave's evolution into a chartered, secretariat-backed institution provides one model for the kind of durable multilateral mechanism that MAHASAGAR will need to replicate at greater scale. India's assumption of the IONS rotating chairmanship at the end of 2025 provides a direct leadership platform for shaping the normative and operational agenda of the region's primary naval forum. And the IFC-IOR in Gurugram, with its 22 white shipping partnerships, provides the maritime domain awareness backbone without which any regional security architecture remains informationally blind (Durai, 2025).

The shift in India's role — from net security provider to preferred security partner — marks a qualitatively important transition that MAHASAGAR both reflects and reinforces. A net security provider gives security to others; a preferred security partner builds security with others. The former is paternalistic in structure even when benevolent in intent; the latter implies genuine co-production and shared ownership of regional outcomes. India's willingness to export defence equipment, extend defence Lines of Credit, and integrate partner states into its own maritime information networks rather than merely transferring hardware to them, reflects the preferred partner logic in practical operational terms (Durai, 2025).

### 7.3 Climate, Blue Economy, and MAHASAGAR's Governance Depth

MAHASAGAR's most architecturally significant innovation may be its integration of climate governance with maritime security architecture. The IPCC's successive assessments have documented with growing precision the existential vulnerability of low-lying Indian Ocean small island states — the Maldives, Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands — to sea-level rise, storm intensification, and coral reef degradation. These are not merely environmental concerns: they threaten the territorial integrity, food security, and economic viability of sovereign states. By embedding climate resilience as a core governance objective rather than a supplementary development aim, MAHASAGAR positions India as a credible actor in the climate-ocean governance debates that will increasingly dominate Indian Ocean politics through the remainder of the century (The Financial Times, 2025).

The blue economy receives considerably more precise and operationally specific attention in MAHASAGAR than in SAGAR. Rather than treating oceanic resources as an abstract domain of shared prosperity, MAHASAGAR moves toward coordinated fisheries management, joint marine scientific research, harmonised approaches to seabed resource governance, and sustainable maritime transport frameworks that can be monitored and enforced. This specificity reflects both the growing economic weight of ocean resources to IOR states and the recognition that resource competition — particularly over fish stocks and offshore energy — could generate interstate tensions if not addressed through proactive governance (National Maritime Foundation, 2026).

### 7.4 Reconciling Quad and IOR Leadership

The most politically sensitive challenge MAHASAGAR must navigate is the apparent tension between India's Quad membership and its ambition to lead a genuinely inclusive, non-adversarial Indian Ocean order. Non-aligned IOR states — and ASEAN members in particular — have been consistent in their discomfort with security frameworks perceived as directed against China, preferring engagement over bloc confrontation. India's management of this tension through MAHASAGAR has involved two complementary moves: emphasising the Quad's constructive, non-adversarial agenda (humanitarian assistance, vaccine delivery, infrastructure investment, cyber security) rather than its containment dimensions; and framing MAHASAGAR itself in the language of ASEAN centrality, inclusive governance, and rule-of-law that the non-aligned world finds most acceptable (Durai, 2025; The Indian Express, 2025).

Whether this balancing act is sustainable as US-China competition intensifies remains an open question. India's strategic autonomy — its insistence on retaining independent judgment rather than binding itself to any alliance bloc — has served it well in navigating great-power rivalry without surrendering diplomatic latitude. But maintaining that autonomy while deepening operational coordination with Quad partners, expanding MAHASAGAR's governance architecture across the Global South, and managing the BRI-versus-alternatives competition for infrastructure investment in the IOR will require a degree of diplomatic agility that even India's most skilful foreign policy practitioners will find demanding.

## 8. Comparing SAGAR and MAHASAGAR: Evolution, Not Revolution

Analysed side by side, SAGAR and MAHASAGAR emerge as different phases of a single strategic project rather than competing approaches. The normative core — UNCLOS, freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute settlement, littoral primacy in regional governance, unconditional and demand-driven development cooperation — is identical across both doctrines. The institutional landscape is continuous: every platform that SAGAR built or reinvigorated forms the foundation on which MAHASAGAR is constructing its more ambitious architecture. The relational capital accumulated through a decade of capacity-building, exercises, and humanitarian deployments is the most valuable asset MAHASAGAR inherits — and the one that cannot be replicated quickly by any competitor.

The meaningful differences lie in scale, scope, and institutional ambition. MAHASAGAR's geographic horizon extends from the IOR into a genuinely global engagement with the developing world, reflecting India's growth from a regional maritime power into a global one. Its institutional architecture moves from voluntary cooperation toward structural interdependency — co-investment

mechanisms, chartered bodies, information-sharing networks — that are more resilient to political disruption. Its developmental philosophy, rooted in SAGAR's non-conditionality, has been elaborated through India's G-20 presidency, Voice of the Global South summits, and MAHASAGAR's explicit Global South emphasis into a comprehensive alternative development model. And its climate governance integration addresses the full spectrum of Indian Ocean governance challenges rather than only the security-development binary that SAGAR was designed to handle.

What both doctrines share, and what distinguishes them from the maritime policies of any other state in the region, is the combination of normative coherence, operational follow-through, and civilisational grounding that gives them a particular kind of legitimacy. India is not making strategic moves disconnected from its history and identity; it is consciously reclaiming a maritime inheritance, symbolised by Rajendra Chola's millennium and the blue chakra on the national flag, and translating it into twenty-first-century statecraft. That combination of historical depth and contemporary strategic purposefulness is rare in global maritime politics, and it constitutes India's most distinctive contribution to the governance of the world's third-largest ocean.

## 9. Conclusion

The arc from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, traced across a decade of Indian Ocean statecraft, tells a story about what it takes to build a maritime order from scratch. India arrived at that project without the financial resources of China, without the naval reach of the United States, and without the institutional infrastructure of ASEAN or NATO. What it brought instead was geographic centrality, civilisational legitimacy, an instinct for non-coercive partnership, and — over time — the patient accumulation of bilateral trust, multilateral presence, and operational capability that no doctrine, however well designed, can substitute for.

SAGAR gave that project a coherent identity and set of commitments. It created IONS and the Colombo Security Conclave, built the white shipping network and the IFC-IOR, established India as the Indian Ocean's net security provider through a series of humanitarian deployments, and launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative as a seven-pillar governance framework connecting the IOR to the wider Indo-Pacific. MAHASAGAR extends that work — taking the multilateral architecture from voluntary consultation toward structural interdependency, expanding the geographic scope from the Indian Ocean to the Global South as a whole, and integrating climate resilience and blue economy governance as core rather than supplementary objectives.

The MILAN exercise's growth from five navies in 1995 to 72 nations in 2026 — with India's domestically built aircraft carrier as the anchor platform — offers the most vivid single metric of how far that project has advanced. But numbers, important as they are, do not capture the quality of what India has built: the trust among naval officers who have trained and exercised together across decades, the information networks that give regional states a shared picture of their maritime domain, the norms that have been embedded in the IOR's diplomatic culture through thousands of bilateral conversations and multilateral declarations. These are the real outputs of strategic multilateralism, and they are MAHASAGAR's most important inheritance from the decade of SAGAR that preceded it.

The challenges ahead are real. The financing gap with China persists. The tension between Quad participation and IOR inclusivity will require ongoing management. Domestic bureaucratic capacity must be mobilised at a pace that matches doctrinal ambition. And the global South, whose trust India has cultivated carefully, will watch to see whether MAHASAGAR's commitments prove as durable as its rhetoric is eloquent. But the trajectory is clear, and the foundation is solid. India has not merely announced a maritime vision; it has spent a decade building one. MAHASAGAR is the name for what comes next.

## References


1. Brewster, D. (2014). India's ocean: The story of India's bid for regional leadership. Routledge.
2. Bull, H. (1977). The anarchical society: A study of order in world politics. Macmillan.
3. Durai, S. (2025, August 13). India's maritime vision: From SAGAR to Indo-Pacific to MAHASAGAR. Embassy of India, Dili, Timor Leste — Articles Commissioned by XPD Division. https://www.indembassydili.gov.in/section/articles-commissioned-by-xpd-division/india-s-maritime-vision-from-sagar-to-indo-pacific-to-mahasagar-by-amb-suchitra-durai/
4. The Financial Times. (2025, January 18). India's maritime governance and the climate security nexus in the Indo-Pacific. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com
5. Gateway House. (2017). Sagarmala or SAGAR: A maritime dilemma? https://www.gatewayhouse.in/sagarmala-or-sagar-a-maritime-dilemma/
6. The Guardian. (2023, August 5). India's quiet ocean: The limits of New Delhi's Indo-Pacific strategy. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com
7. Herbert-Burns, R. (2007). Compound piracy at sea in the early twenty-first century. In P. Lehr (Ed.), Violence at sea: Piracy in the age of global terrorism (pp. 95–120). Routledge.
8. The Hindu. (2020, March 26). Putting the SAGAR vision to the test. The Hindu. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/putting-the-sagar-vision-to-the-test/article31399219.ece
9. The Indian Express. (2025, February 14). MAHASAGAR and the new map of India's maritime ambitions. The Indian Express. https://www.indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/mahasagar-india-maritime-strategy-indo-pacific/
10. JSTOR. (2021). India and SAGAR: Reviewing the doctrine's implementation in the Indian Ocean Region. Journal of Defence Studies, 15(2), 45–67. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48750351
11. Kumari, U. (2026, February 17). MILAN 2026 anchors maritime vision. The Statesman, p. 6.
12. Lukaszuk, P. (Ed.). (2024). India's role in the Indian Ocean region in the 21st century: Maritime governance perspective. Routledge.
13. Mahan, A. T. (1890). The influence of sea power upon history, 1660–1783. Little, Brown and Company.
14. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2015, March 12). Prime Minister's remarks at the commissioning of offshore patrol vessel, Mauritius. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/
15. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2025, March 21). Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi announced Vision MAHASAGAR. https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?13355/
16. Mohan, C. R. (2012). Samudra manthan: Sino-Indian rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
17. National Maritime Foundation. (2026, February 2). Between convergence and constraint: India–EU maritime cooperation under the Strategic Agenda 2025. National Maritime Foundation. https://maritimeindia.org/between-convergence-and-constraint-india-eu-maritime-cooperation-under-the-strategic-agenda-2025/
18. Padmaja, G. (2018, April 25). Revisiting 'SAGAR': India's template for cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. National Maritime Foundation. https://maritimeindia.org/revisiting-sagar-indias-template-for-cooperation-in-the-indian-ocean-region/
19. Pannikkar, K. M. (1951). India and the Indian Ocean: An essay on the influence of sea power on Indian history. George Allen and Unwin.
20. Pant, H. V. (2009). India in the Indian Ocean: Growing mismatch between ambitions and capabilities. Pacific Affairs, 82(2), 279–297. https://doi.org/10.5509/2009822279
21.