

India's Role in Capability Development Measures for Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Under SAGAR

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—The paper looks into India's growing initiatives around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) under SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) for enhancing maritime cooperation, and how it is enhancing maritime security and governance through capability development measures by providing assistance to the other IOR littoral states. It will also look at the regional mechanism where India is playing a significant role to enhance the capability of regional nations and uphold maritime security and governance in the region.

Methodology—Content analysis has been the primary approach to consolidate the arguments.

Findings—With the ever-growing significance of the IOR, and with India being the region's major power, it has to work closely with the other littoral states to enhance maritime security in the region. That can be possible through a collective mechanism and by increasing the capability of the other states, as India can provide resources and both military and institutional training. This will help India continue to be the regional security provider amid growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region.

Practical Implications—The paper attempts to point out that through capability development, India can uphold its strategic influence and position in the IOR, which is becoming a zone of major power rivalry between India and China.

Keywords: BRI, capability development, Indian Ocean, maritime security, SAGAR

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I. Introduction

The 21st century has seen a geopolitical shift from Eurocentric West to Asia-centric East with the rise of major Asian powers like China, India, ASEAN, etc. This is impacting the overall power dynamic, which is now shifting from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. In the geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific, it can be argued that the Indian Ocean Region has a prime significance. The Indian Ocean is the world's third largest water body, stretching from the African coast in the west to Australia in the east. The region is rich in natural resources, as it is home to 40% of world's offshore petroleum, while also being home to some of the fastest-growing economies. The Indian Ocean carries two-thirds of the world's seaborne trade in oil, 50% of world's container traffic and one-third of world's seaborne bulk cargo.¹

The sea lane of communication which stretches across the Indian Ocean is one of the most vital, connecting some of the most strategically important straits like the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. With high cargo movement, the threats of piracy have always been a factor in the Indian Ocean, with the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca being major targets of maritime piracy. Along with piracy, the IOR also faces issues like maritime terrorism and illicit drug trafficking. Apart from this, the region also faces major natural calamities every year, which have a toll both on human life and economic cost.

It is in this context that India's role for maritime security through capability development measures under its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy becomes of prime importance, as that will not only keep India as the net security provider, but also help tackle diverse maritime threats which might impact India's national security. India, under its SAGAR initiative, is playing a key constructive role in enhancing the maritime capability of the IOR nations and toward developing regional mechanisms for maritime security and development of the region.

The first part of the paper will look at the concept of SAGAR and the various initiatives undertaken by India in the Indian Ocean. The second part of the paper will look into India's role in capability development measures in the Indian Ocean, and the final segment will look at how SAGAR can be a major foreign policy tool for India under the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region.

II. The Concept of SAGAR and India's Initiatives in the Indian Ocean Region

The growing significance of the Indian Ocean in the geopolitics of the 21st century has made SAGAR a very significant initiative for India to maintain its sphere of influence in this region. However, there is not one significant official document related to SAGAR that has been laid down by the Indian government.² The concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) was first articulated by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his 2015 state visit to the island nations of Mauritius.³ It was a historic trip in itself as Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit Seychelles since 1981 and also the first standalone Indian prime minister to visit Sri Lanka since 1987.⁴ However, it was while

commissioning the India-built offshore naval patrol vessel *Barracuda* for the Mauritian Coast Guard that Modi unveiled the SAGAR concept, which is the Hindi word for “sea.”⁵ This is an interesting analogy, as the vessel built by India would be used by the Mauritian Coast Guard to safeguard its EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) and the concept of SAGAR revolves around security for all in the region. Therefore, announcing the launch of SAGAR from that particular platform echoed India’s commitment for regional development and security.

Although there has been no official document in regard to SAGAR, the speech of the Indian prime minister in Mauritius in 2015 pointed toward five key propositions: (1) maintain national security and safeguard national interest along with maintaining security of the region; (2) enhance economic and security cooperation along with building maritime security capacity of regional nations; (3) promote cooperation and collective action through existing institutions like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) for maritime cooperation; (4) enhance collaboration and sustainable development; and (5) work with extra-regional actors with stakes in the region.⁶ Through this initiative, India wants to work collectively with the various IOR nations. Being the region’s major power, it has taken the lead not only to maintain its own strategic interest, but also the interests of its maritime neighbors by enhancing their capabilities for ensuring their economic and security well-being,⁷ with the primary aim to help them enhance their interests through capability development, collective security mechanism, and advancing peace and stability in the region. With India’s rise, the significance of the maritime sphere has galvanized. This has, therefore, led India to recalibrate its overall maritime strategy so that it can play a major role in the regional maritime security architecture.⁸ The IOR has always been dominated by India’s influence, and India has played a significant role in managing peace and stability in the IOR. It has helped in averting multiple coups, from Mauritius in 1983, to Seychelles in 1986 and Maldives in 1988.⁹ During the recent Covid-19 crisis, India launched major initiatives. Under the banner of “Mission Sagar,” India dispatched its naval ship *INS Kesari* to Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles.¹⁰ The ship had a medical assistant team and consignments of Covid-related medicines and food. The Covid relief work under Mission Sagar was inspired by PM Modi’s vision of SAGAR.¹¹ India has always been the first responder to any natural calamity in the IOR, and therefore, this led India to be labeled as the net security provider in the overall Indian Ocean Region.¹²

III. India’s Role in Capability Development Measures in the Indian Ocean Region

With the ever-growing importance of the maritime sphere, it is significant for nations to have their own capability to deal with any threats, traditional or non-traditional, arising in the maritime sphere. However, most of the nations of the IOR do not have adequate training, resources or equipment needed to conduct any such operations for enhancing maritime security. This makes the region dependent on other sub-regional or extra-regional nations for maintaining security. The recent fire onboard a ship carrying chemicals off the coast of Sri Lanka required Indian assistance, as after six days the Sri Lankan authorities were unable to douse the fire.¹³ Therefore, enhancement of capability will lead to quicker resolution of these

kinds of threats, which can reduce any resulting security implications. Capability development requires developing nations to cooperate with relevant organizations, associations and nations which have the capability, through which it can help them enhance their (1) human resources capability; (2) institutional capability; and (3) create a sound environment.¹⁴ The maritime capacity-building measures have various paradigms as nations tend to increase the capacity of other nations through joint exercises, providing equipment which can help them carry out various operations, and also training crew and staff.

The importance of individual nations playing their part for maritime security goes on to have a major impact for the overall security of the region. This has led India, under PM Modi, to look deeper into collective security mechanisms for maritime security, a fundamental pillar of the SAGAR initiative. Being the major power of the region, India has stepped up its efforts through various forms of capacity-building measures to enable the nations to develop capabilities to respond to the rising maritime challenges. During his three-nation trip to Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius in 2015, PM Modi signed various agreements which would enable the maritime capacity of these Indian Ocean littoral nations. Apart from gifting the offshore patrol vessel *Barracuda* to Mauritius, the Indian PM also offered a \$500 million line of credit for various infrastructure projects in the island nation.¹⁵ The island nation has been a big recipient of Indian grants, which has helped create major infrastructural development projects, from housing to hospitals to the nation's supreme court.¹⁶ These initiatives will enhance institutional capability measures which can help in the maritime governance in the Indian Ocean Region.

The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is an important component of Mauritius's economy, and its protection is of great significance from both economic and security perspectives. This has led India to work with the Mauritian government in development of their maritime defense. During the state visit of Indian President Ramnath Kovind to Mauritius in 2018, India had provided a \$100 million line of credit to Mauritius for procurement of defense equipment along with other defense deals for enhancing Mauritius's maritime security force.¹⁷ India has also been helping to train Mauritian security personnel, conducting joint patrols and enhancing Mauritius's coastal surveillance capability.¹⁸ With such a long coastline, surveillance becomes of prime importance as it allows law enforcement agencies to intercept any possible maritime security threat. India has been working for decades to enhance Mauritian surveillance capability around its EEZ. It had earlier provided the Mauritian maritime agencies with Dornier aircraft, along with training to conduct such operations. In 2016, it further provided Mauritian authorities with third Dornier aircrafts for coast surveillance.¹⁹ These efforts have largely contributed to enhancing the maritime capabilities of Mauritian authorities, thus further securing regional security.

In the case of Seychelles, India has played a key role in developing its military capacity by providing training and equipment. In 2012, the then-president of Seychelles had lauded India for its role in maintaining the security of their maritime EEZ.²⁰ During his trip to the island nation in 2015, PM Modi announced the gifting of a second Dornier aircraft to Seychelles along with inaugurating the first of the eight coastal surveillance radars being built by India for the maritime surveillance of the region.²¹ In 2018, during the delivery of the aircraft, the Indian external affairs minister pointed out that securing the sea is fundamental for the security and growth of both the nations—it is the cornerstone of India's SAGAR initiative, and India would be committed to provide support through capacity-building measures with Seychelles.²² The area of sustainable development has also been addressed by

India, with New Delhi recently handing over the Magistrate Building and a one-megawatt solar power plant to Seychelles.²³ These initiatives, along with India's support during the Covid-19 pandemic, which included over 50,000 doses of vaccine, were well received by the president of Seychelles, who had pointed to India's support as being crucial for the nation's development.²⁴ Under SAGAR, collective security is taken to be a fundamental pillar, and this has led India to work hand-in-hand for capability development with other IOR nations like Sri Lanka. The Indian Navy is providing training assistance and support to the Sri Lankan Navy by providing specialized equipment for their naval academy.²⁵

Table 1. India's Supply of Military Equipment to Four IOR Nations for Maritime Security Since 2015

Country	Name of Equipment	Type of Equipment	Year of Order	Year of Delivery	No. of Units Provided
Seychelles	Do-228MP	Military patrol aircraft	2015	2018	1
	EL/M-2022	Surveillance radar	2015	2018	1
	L&T Fast Interceptor	Maritime patrol vessel	2016	2016	1
	FPV-300	Maritime patrol vessel	2021	2021	1
Mauritius	Do-228MP	Military patrol aircraft	2014	2016	1
	MCGS <i>Barracuda</i>	Offshore patrol vessel	2014	2016	1
	Dhruv	Helicopter for policing	2021	2022	1
	Do-228	Light transport aircraft	2021	2021	1
	Do-228	Light transport aircraft	2021	2022	1
Maldives	Do-228MP	Military patrol aircraft	2020	2020	1
	<i>Kamiyab</i> patrol vessel	Maritime patrol vessel	2019	2019	1
Sri Lanka	<i>Samrath</i>	Offshore patrol vessel	2014	2017/2018	2
	Do-228	Maritime patrol aircraft	Gifted	2022	1

Source: Compiled by the authors using various sources, including the arms transfer database of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>, and various news reports.

Speaking of Maldives, Indo-Maldivian relations went through a difficult phase prior to 2018 as President Yameen gravitated more toward China. This was seen as posing major security challenges to India, as Maldives had long been considered to be under the Indian sphere of influence. India has always played an important role in matters related to Maldivian security and protection of its EEZ. In 2015, India helped Maldives install the first of three coastal radars, in addition to donating \$240,000 for operational expenses of helicopters while also signing various defense pacts.²⁶ Under constrained relations, India still pushed to enhance Maldivian maritime security and garnered back Maldivian sympathy to India's security concerns vis-à-vis China. With the ousting of President Yameen in 2018 and the coming of President Solih into power, India has staged a comeback in Maldives. India has

been providing training to Maldivian maritime security forces for years, which has played a major role in enhancing their capacity-building measures. India has offered Maldives a \$50 million line of credit for various defense projects and to develop naval facilities which would enhance humanitarian assistance and maritime security capability in the IOR.²⁷

Also since 2015, India has signed agreements that would allow it the access to ports and facilities of France in the Reunion islands, the U.S. in Diego Garcia, and Duqm port in Oman, which will allow India to quickly provide maritime assistance to disaster relief or antipiracy operations and uphold maritime governance in the region under the SAGAR initiative.²⁸ It has also led India to develop strategic partnerships with major Asia Pacific nations like Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, and Vietnam, which expands India's reach in the wider Indo-Pacific region.²⁹ India has also adopted new approaches which is pushing its capabilities as a net security provider³⁰ in the region, including a measure called Mission-Based Deployment (MBD) which emphasizes the ability to deploy mission-ready ships and aircrafts at critical sea lanes of communication.³¹

Table 2. Indian Navy's Mission-Based Deployment Plan

Deployment	Area
ANDEP	Patrolling between the North Andaman and South Nicobar
CENDEP	Patrolling in waters south of India, off the Maldives and Sri Lanka
IODEP	Patrolling in the South Indian Ocean, off Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar
GULFDEP	Patrolling of the North Arabian Sea and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf
MALDEP	An IN ship is permanently sailing near the mouths of the Straits of Malacca
POGDEP	Anti-piracy patrolling of the Gulf of Aden
NORDEP	Patrolling of the North Bay of Bengal, in waters north of the Andaman and the coasts of Bangladesh and Myanmar

Source: Sujan Dutta, "Indian Navy Informs Government About the Fleet's Reoriented Mission Pattern," *New Indian Express*, April 1, 2018.

This plan will allow the Indian Navy to dispatch its resources quickly during hours of need around the Indian Ocean, which will work to maintain security for all in the region. As pointed out by the Indian defense minister, the Indian Navy has successfully conducted mission-based deployment around the Indian Ocean, which has increased maritime domain awareness and provided swift disaster relief work.³²

IV. Regional Institutions for Maritime Governance and Capability Development Measures

Regional mechanisms have been a significant way to integrate regional nations into a singular grid for maintaining security and enhancing regional partnerships. India has been a major player in initiating and supporting some of the major regional institutions with a

goal of improving maritime governance and security in the IOR. This section of the paper will look at some of the regional institutions through which India will play a major role for maritime security and capability development.

4.1 Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)

The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) is a regional organization structured to answer the needs of maritime security of the region. India pitched the initiative in 2008 and it has been described as the first significant maritime security initiative in the 21st century.³³ IONS is fashioned after the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), where all the navies of the West Pacific would meet to discuss cooperative issues and matters that needed further consideration.³⁴ Therefore, the fundamental concept of IONS was to show India's ability, similar to that of the U.S., as a major power and to promote the prominent role of the Indian Navy in the IOR.³⁵ However, the launch of IONS can be credited with enhancing regional interoperability and trust among regional navies and coast guards. This can allow joint ventures in matters related to maritime security as the region is an epicenter of transnational crimes and natural disasters. Thus, having a mechanism which unites regional nations will accelerate maritime security initiatives. There were four fundamental objectives outlined during the induction of the IONS:³⁶

1. To promote shared understanding in matters related to maritime security in IOR.
2. To enhance the capacity of the regional states and work on maritime security and stability.
3. To promote and establish consultative cooperative mechanisms to mitigate maritime security challenges in the region.
4. To enhance joint operations, organizational skills and logistical systems for speedy recovery during humanitarian assistance and disaster relief work in IOR.

Under the concept of SAGAR, the relevance of IONS becomes vital as it brings together the navies of all IOR nations, increasing the collective approach to maritime security. With initiatives like SAGAR and IONS, India can enhance the capabilities of regional navies, which would be constructive for regional development.³⁷ During the 10th edition of IONS in 2018, the theme was set to be "IONS as a catalyst for SAGAR," which highlights the significance of SAGAR in integrating other major regional mechanisms with itself.³⁸ Therefore, it can assist in the enhancement of regional security and interoperability, subsequently helping with developing capabilities of other Indian Ocean littoral states.

4.2 Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was one of the first organizations established to answer challenges in the region. IORA was first launched in 1997 with the aim to develop regional multilateral structure with an emphasis on economic and social agendas, however it remained silent for a long time.³⁹ Unlike IONS, whose major emphasis has been maritime security, IORA has been focused on the economic objectives around the Indian Ocean, though the organization is still to reach its full potential in regard to enhancing integration of the region and its nations.⁴⁰ IORA has six major priority areas

to push sustained growth and also align maritime security with IONS, however no formal link has been established between the two organizations.⁴¹ This emphasizes lacks of synergy among the institutions in the IOR, which can impact their work capabilities. Being the major regional power, India's role in the IOR becomes very important and after the launch of SAGAR, organizations like IORA are of prime importance for regional integrity and promoting the notion of collective development. It has been pointed out by India that IORA will be playing a significant role in the Indo-Pacific and will be a major tool for regional cooperation.⁴² After the launch of SAGAR in 2015, India is actively working to elevate IORA through dialogues and forums, and also has a 10-point suggestion for the development of the association and work on a blue economy.⁴³ IORA allows the nations of the IOR to gather under its umbrella and push for collective economic development, which will have a positive implication for the entire region.

4.3 Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC–IOR)

The establishment of the IFC–IOR is taken to be a significant initiative to enhance maritime security in the region. It was established in 2019 with the primary aim of sharing white shipping data, which would lead to a more collaborative approach for maritime security, as the center has built links with 18 countries and 15 maritime centers.⁴⁴ The IFC can enhance maritime security around the IOR and provide real-time analysis of maritime traffic. The fundamental goal for establishing the IFC–IOR has been to increase joint monitoring of the IOR as it becomes a hub for great power competition, apart from the increase in natural disasters and transnational crimes like piracy and drug trafficking.⁴⁵ The joint monitoring has led India to request that other major and littoral nations station a liaison officer at the IFC for better coordination and sharing of information. The IFC currently has liaison officers from five major countries—the U.S., France, Australia, Japan, and the UK. Also, there is high interest among many other nations to send liaison officers, which can help in interoperability and information sharing, enhancing maritime security.⁴⁶ The IFC initiative can help India in continuing to promote itself as a net security provider in the region as China expands its footprints around the Indian Ocean.⁴⁷ With India working to maintain its sphere of influence around the IOR, it has to work to increase its international profile to meet its strategic needs. Therefore, it is critical for India to take lead steps for upholding maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region.⁴⁸

V. Chinese Influence in the IOR and Its Implications for India's Initiatives

The launch of SAGAR can be argued to be a major foreign policy tool to advance and counter growing Chinese influence seen since the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Indian Ocean is one of the most strategic waterways for China in the 21st century, as 80% of its oil and other natural resources pass through these waters and the Malacca Strait.⁴⁹ This is a major security concern for China as any disruption of its imports will have a drastic implication on its economic growth, making the Indian Ocean an issue of national interest for China. This led former Chinese President Hu Jintao to label

China's dependency on the Indian Ocean and Malacca Strait as "China's Malacca Dilemma."⁵⁰ With the launch of the maritime aspect of the BRI in 2013, China's economic investments around the IOR have quadrupled as it has been working on development of major infrastructure projects around the region. This has also raised Chinese stakes in the IOR, making it a significant region for China's security and national interests. China is constructing multiple ports under its maritime silk route initiative which, according to China, will advance interregional trade among nations.

However, Chinese investments are considered to be very opaque, having major implications for the host nation, as then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pointed out by saying that Chinese deals come "not with strings attached but with shackles."⁵¹ This notion has gathered a lot of attention, mainly in India, as the nation views Chinese investment around the Indian Ocean to have a dual purpose under String of Pearls. The major crux of the argument regarding String of Pearls is that Chinese military and civilians both would be using the ports in the IOR, a major security implication for India.⁵² The takeover of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota by China strengthened this argument and has raised alarm bells in neighboring India. With the unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the alarm bells regarding predatory Chinese investments have only gotten louder. This is seen to have major implications for India, as growing Chinese influence will undermine the Indian sphere of influence in the IOR. As pointed out by a former Indian diplomat, India's position on rejecting the BRI is significant, given that Beijing is planning a China-centric Asia through BRI, and India joining it means accepting Chinese superiority.⁵³

Growing Chinese economic initiatives under BRI has had an impact on India's influence in the region. In recent times, a growing number of countries around the Indian Ocean and its neighborhood have cozied up to the Chinese, especially given its deep pockets. In 2014, a Chinese submarine had docked at Colombo, which rang alarm bells in New Delhi as it was seen to have major implications for Indian national security.⁵⁴ The recent docking of a Chinese spy ship in 2022 in the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota, which has been constructed by China, further reiterates India's fear of China's growing footprint in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁵ During Abdulla Yameen's tenure, Maldives gravitated toward Beijing and signed key pacts under BRI.⁵⁶ These became a major obstacle toward the notion of taking a collective approach in the IOR, as some of the deals undermined India's strategic interests. With time, these growing Chinese initiatives will try to further undermine India's influence, which therefore presents major challenges for India in the region.

This has led India to restructure its policy around the Indian Ocean to answer the challenges of growing Chinese initiatives, and SAGAR can be argued as a major foreign policy initiative to rebut this challenge. SAGAR has been labeled as the major foreign policy initiative adopted by the Modi government to enhance its outreach in the region. With the Indo-Pacific garnering momentum, the maritime aspect has become a crucial element in Indian foreign policy-making through initiatives like BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), Project Mausam, and SAGAR. Among all of these, SAGAR is seen to provide India with strategic depth in the Indian Ocean by maintaining its strategic influence amid growing geopolitical competition. SAGAR can be a viable alternative to China's BRI in the region as its approach is aimed at collective development, unlike the extractive approach of the BRI.⁵⁷ Under the SAGAR initiative, India wants to promote the agenda of collective development, which will

thereby enhance the capability of regional nations and promote the agenda of growth for all. This can be India's major foreign policy approach in countering China's BRI in the IOR. However, the vision of SAGAR is yet to reach to its full potential, as India can link its initiative with its other maritime initiatives, which could provide India the credibility needed to expand its reach around the wider Indo-Pacific.⁵⁸ This would make it a credible player in the Indo-Pacific region and uphold strategic interest amid growing Chinese initiatives in the region.

VI. Conclusion

The launch of SAGAR has been a major initiative adopted by the Indian government to not only spread its sphere of influence but also help in the collective development of the region. The various capacity-building measures initiated under it have been crucial to safeguarding the maritime security of the region. The 21st century is regarded as the Asian century, which would see the rise of major Asian powers with the Indian Ocean at the center of this development. Therefore, maritime security around the Indian Ocean becomes of primary importance. The SAGAR initiative adopted by India has been working on capacity building measures, which can be regarded as crucial for the overall maritime security of the Indian Ocean region. With the region facing major issues stretching from terrorism and drug trafficking to natural calamities, having a resolute maritime force is essential for a swift response. Therefore, India's initiatives under the umbrella of SAGAR will enhance maritime security mechanisms by enhancing the capabilities of the other littoral states and enabling them to work together, which would play a significant role in the overall development of the region. However, more diplomatic, economic and political efforts are required from India's side for running the initiative smoothly. With the return of great power politics in the Indian Ocean Region, there will be some implications that would impact overall development in the region. But collective security mechanisms and collective measures for development could play a binding role for the Asian century to prosper.

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