



INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH COUNTRIES BEYOND ITS SHORE: PEACE, COOPERATION AND GROWTH THROUGH 'SECURITY AND GROWTH FOR ALL IN THE REGION (SAGAR)' POLICY

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Abstract : Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) is a strategic vision of India in Indian Ocean Region to forge regional maritime alliance which was unveiled in year 2015 by Indian Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi. The vision of this doctrine is to strength security and economic ties with countries having maritime borders in IOR. It was part of Modi's diplomacy for "Act East" and "Neighbors First Policy". Of late India has realized that Chinese hegemonic and expansionist behavior in the region is trying to fill the vacuum by coercive diplomacy of debt trap and reigniting border or maritime boundary dispute. In order to achieve a rightful support India needs to develop its Blue Economy. In last one decade India has been able to successfully garner the support of most of the nations in IOR. India because of its long history of peaceful co-existence enjoys the confidence and trust of all in the region. But to achieve it completely SAGAR doctrine and its promulgation is just a beginning and India needs to work relentlessly to thwart Chinese design in IOR with support of all the stakeholders including USA, Japan and Australia. In this article an endeavor has been made to chalk out a design for the way ahead with various opportunities and challenges.

INTRODUCTION

India has the unique distinction of sharing approximately 7500 kms of maritime boundaries with seven countries which includes Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Maldives. Apart from these countries, nations like Oman, Mauritius, Seychelles in the West and rest of the ASEAN countries in the Southeast play a significant role in shaping Indian foreign policy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In the geo-politics, trade and security calculus of India, the Indian Ocean fall in the core of its policy choices and strategy.

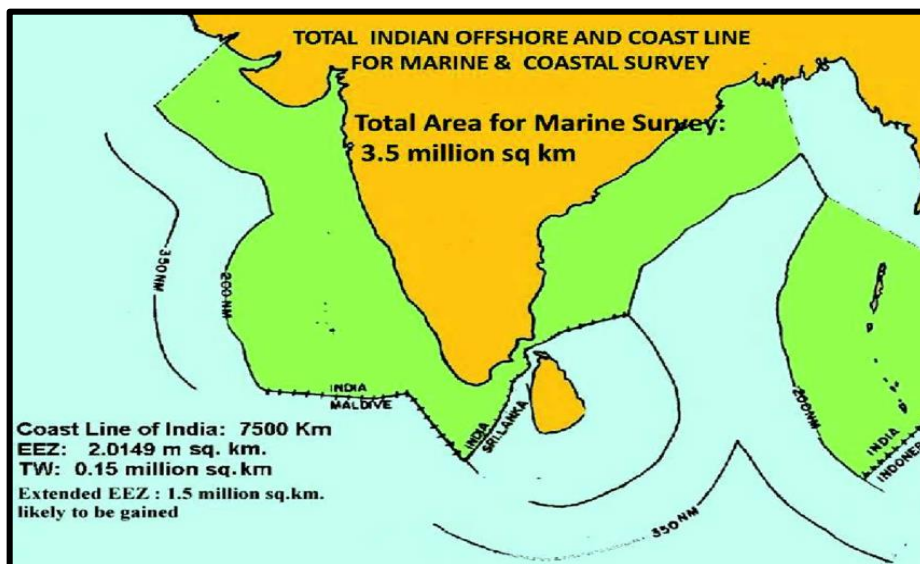


Fig 1 - Marine Geology and Coastal Surveys for Seabed Mapping and Mineral Resource Evaluation in India¹

Till late nineties, India, because of its belligerent neighbors and unsettled land borders, has always been intertwined and focused on its land borders. For a long time, it has had a ‘continental outlook’ wherein it paid very less attention towards the maritime potential of the Indian Ocean which resulted in many undesirable developments like China making inroads in this region as part of its expansionist and hegemonic agenda. The ‘String of Pearls’ as part of ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) is the most glaring example of the agenda. But over last two decades India has realized the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the above countries which is evident from its ‘Look East’ and ‘Act East’ Policies. This policy was furthered by the Indian government when in March 2015 during his visit to Mauritius, the Indian Prime Minister announced concept of SAGAR doctrine which means security and growth for all in the Indian Ocean Region. It is a maritime initiative of the government of India with a focus on blue economy and formulation of policies for the IOR to ensure peace, prosperity and stability of India in the region. Apart from the same its goal is to search for a conducive environment of trust and transparency, enhance maritime cooperation, display mutual concern and respect for each other’s interest, abide by international maritime rules and regulations and ensure peaceful settlement of all maritime issues. The SAGAR doctrine is in the sync with principles of Indian Ocean Rim Association which is a consortium of 21 member states with India as one of the observer countries.

India, because of its location in the IOR, growing economy and stable leadership naturally assumes a leading position from where it can rally all the coastal nations in the region towards mutual cooperation, growth, uninterrupted trade, capability build up and meeting security challenges of the future. The Prime Minister of India while enunciating the vision of SAGAR had said that vision of the Indian Ocean Region was rooted in advancing cooperation in the region and to use each other’s capabilities for the benefits of all in common maritime home. India’s resolve to address its long pending issues in the IOR is manifesting into actions. This is evident from the fact that for the first time Indian Navy published a policy document which articulates India’s policy in the IOR, by the name of ‘Ensuring Secure Sea: Indian Maritime Security Strategy’ in October 2015. This document enunciates that country is committed to: -

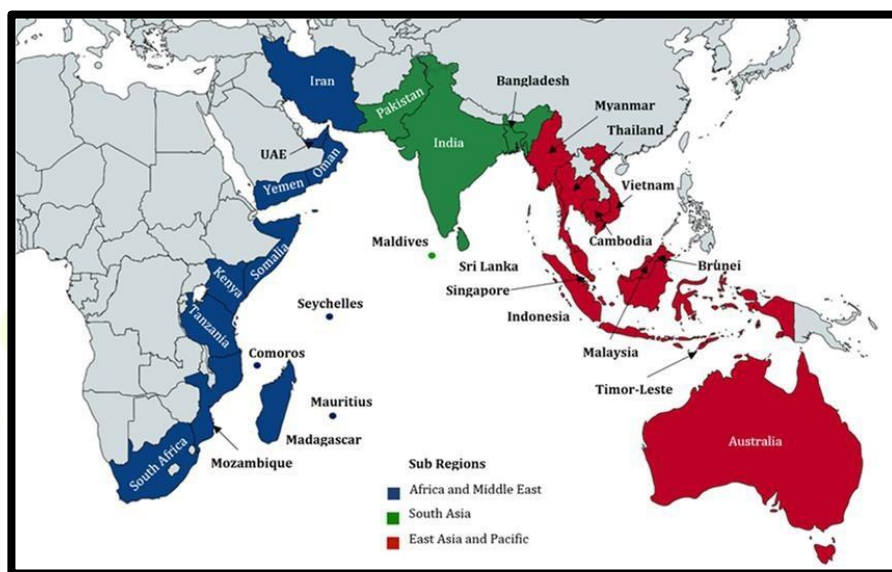
- Safety, security and stability in the IOR.
- Enhance maritime security cooperation amongst regional partners by combined surveillance and monitoring.
- Combating terrorism and piracy in the IOR by taking multilateral maritime security initiatives with regional partners.
- Rekindle cultural linkages with the states in the region.
- Convert the IOR into a frontier of sustainable economic growth and development.

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Schematic-Map-showing-EEZ-and-TW-Boundary-of-India_fig1_305712816/actions#reference

In spite of clear intent of the government and all the policies in place, the pace of engagement and unfolding the action plan are rather slow which needs to be vigorously pursued without wasting time. This paper endeavors to unfold the actions which India needs to take in the IOR as part of the SAGAR doctrine to safeguard its own interest and counter any hegemonic and expansionist agenda in the region.

Significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

After the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world. There are 51 coastline and land - locked countries in the IOR which include 26 states of the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR), five states of the Red Sea, four countries of the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, France, England and 13 land - locked states. The Suez Canal near Egypt, Bab el Mandeb at the junction of Djibouti and Yemen, the Strait of Hormuz at the confluence of Iran and Oman, and the Strait of Malacca are four critical choke points in the Indian Ocean. Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, Colombo, Durban, Jakarta, Melbourne, and Richards Bay of South Africa are the major seaports in the region.



Indian Ocean Region²

Alfred Mahan had once said; “Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia”. This statement is as relevant and true as the ocean itself. The geo-strategic and political importance of the Indian Ocean Region is based on its location and abundance of natural resources. Traditionally this region has always been the fulcrum of trade, economy and large number of bilateral and regional alliances. Apart from the same its geo-political and economic significance increase manifold because of presence of large number of developed and under developing economies having different culture, ideology, governance and aspirations which dictates their relationship and alliances with neighbors; both immediate and beyond borders/coasts. To attain its interest and aspirations countries in the region are expanding and enhancing their maritime capabilities.

The importance of the IOR can be gauged by the fact that till year 2018, this region connected 12 out of 16 economies of the powerful trillion-dollar club and it has been predicted that by 2033 it will further connect 21 out of the 25 members of the anticipated trillion-dollar club. If this particular attribute is compared with Atlantic and Pacific oceans, they only connect 12 and 13 countries respectively. The IOR is full of natural resources in the sector of minerals, sea mining, energy and fisheries which in turn gives rise to the development of shipping activities, maritime economy and tourism. Oceans account for the three-fourth of the earth’s surface, and it has around 97% of earth’s water. Besides, approximately 99% of the life lives (both flora and fauna) in this area. Amongst all water bodies in the world, the IOR is the third largest (19.8% of earth’s water) through which major sea lines of communications (SLOCs) pass through. The SLOCs in this region have number of choke points through which 80% of the world’s oil trade passes through. It connects the sea from Malacca strait to the strait of Hormuz and beyond. Therefore, in a way it is connecting the world from East to West through sea routes. Apart from the native countries of the IOR, of late this region has

² www.politicsfirindia.com

witnessed the presence of extra regional powers which are economically powerful and militarily strong vis a vis the littoral and coastal country. This dynamic is changing the canvas of geo-politics of the region. Therefore, importance of the IOR is not restricted to the littoral and regional states of the region but it is significantly driving the geo-politics of the world.

India and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The Indian Ocean occupies approximately one-fifth of the world's sea area. In the IOR, India occupies a central and strategic position because of which it enjoys a natural sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean. The Indian peninsula which extends 2000 kms into the sea naturally brings around 50% of the Indian Ocean within 1000 miles of radii from the Indian shores which gives a dominating position to India in middle of the ocean. The Indian Ocean is inextricably connected to the national and economic interests of India. India's position in the Indian Ocean Region is very crucial as its 74% of its trade by value and 90% of its trade by volume takes place through the sea lines of the IOR. Besides, 80% of its energy needs are ferried through the sea lanes of the region. The objective of India's foreign policy towards its coastal neighbors has always been to keep the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace which should be free from superpower rivalry and increased cooperation between coastal countries in the region. Apart from this Indian Ocean has an important role to play in keeping the moderate climate of the Southern India. Along with strategic importance. Indian Ocean is the only fishing ground for coastal fisherman in India. Due to huge marine resources, it spreads prosperity in coastal plains of India.

India's Objectives beyond its Shore

India is heavily dependent SLOCs in the IOR for its international trade wherein 90% of its merchandise trade is through sea. Gradually India is focusing on the requirement of enhancing its soft power by investing in oil, mining, energy needs and infrastructure development projects. India's objectives beyond its shores are as under: -

- Play a constructive role in influencing the IOR by maritime diplomacy, trade, investment, cooperation and formulation of strategic partnership.
- Look beyond its immediate shores and diplomatically and economically engage African regions, Middle East and South Eastern Asian countries as these are the regions which have large energy reserve.
- Play a lead role in the IOR by ensuring maritime security, cooperation and environment of mutual trust amongst all the nations in the region.
- Counter Chinese expansionist and hegemonic aspirations in the region.
- Develop constructive relationship with countries like Maldives, Mauritius, Singapore and Oman to establish an influence and control over the choke points in the IOR.

Regional, Sub-regional and Multinational cooperation

The geostrategic location of the IOR offers an ideal situation for the bilateral and multilateral associations and alliances which are purely based on the vested interest of the countries in the region. These countries cooperate in the sector of maritime security, trade, blue economy and sharing of common cultural values. Among all these sectors trade and economy are the most prominent ones. Various multinational, regional and sub regional alliances of the IOR are as under: -

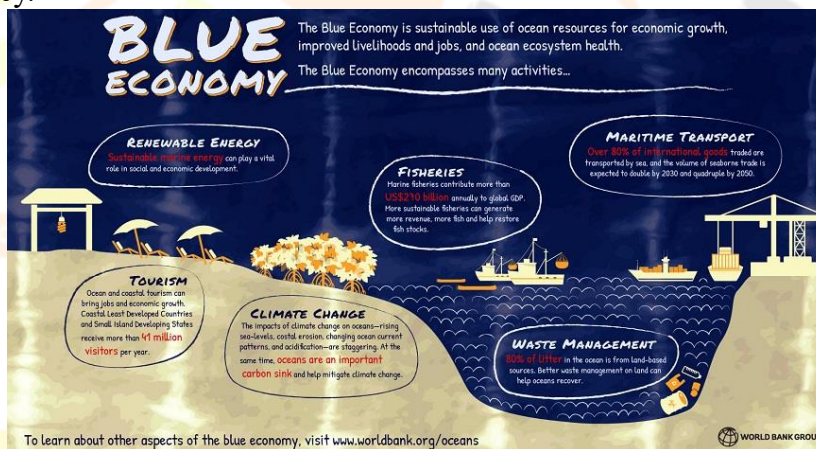
- The Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IORARC).
- The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium(IONS).
- The Gulf Cooperation Council(GCC).
- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation(SAARC).
- The Association of South-East Asian Nations(ASEAN).
- The ASEAN Regional Forum(ARF).
- Southern African Development Community(SADC).
- East African Community (EAC).
- Indian Ocean Commission (COI).
- The Arab League, or League of Arabian States.

- The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).
- The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).
- Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Trade and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Genesis of SAGAR Vision

Indian prime minister Mr Narendra Modi, on 12th March 2015, during the commissioning ceremony of Mauritius National Coastguard Ship Barracuda for the first time proposed the vision of 'SAGAR' which means Security and Growth of All in the Region. The SAGAR doctrine is based on five major elements or policy choices, which are as under³:

- Take all necessary measures to safeguard and defend our mainland and islands. Take concerted efforts towards ensuring a safe, stable and secure IOR. Apart from that all partners in the region will come forward to bail out those who have been struck by nature's fury or, caught in distress in the seas.
- All maritime neighbors and islands state to formulate a concrete plan of action to strengthen the economic and security cooperation in the region. Apart from developing own capabilities all out efforts will be taken by the partners to build the maritime capabilities and economic strength of smaller and weaker countries in the region.
- Collective action and cooperation amongst all the members to ensure peace and maritime security in the region by formulating a mechanism for maritime cooperation.
- Work collectively to enhance prospects of sustainable growth and development of all the states in the region by promoting collaboration in trade, investment, infrastructure development, tourism and science and technology. In short develop Blue Economy for the benefits of all.
- Accommodate the interest of other countries of the world through dialogues, visits, exercises economic partnership and capacity building by creating a climate of trust, respect and mutual transparency.



Blue Economy⁴

Apart from the above then external affairs minister of India Mrs Sushma Swaraj while addressing 3rd Indian Ocean Conference in Vietnam on 27 August 2018 laid further emphasis on promoting hinterland linkages and connectivity of various littoral states and others nations around the region. Particularly linking South East Asia to South Asia and Gulf countries.

Need for SAGAR Doctrine

India's maritime policy on security and trade is based on the approach of SAGAR doctrine which means 'security and growth for all in the region'. Formulation of this doctrine was long pending which gives a vision

³ www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36934/question+NO1510+MISSION+SAGAR

⁴ www.worldbank.org/oceans

to the leadership and policymakers. India always needed such policy documents because of the following reasons: -

- To achieve its diplomatic, political social and economic goals in the region it is imperative for India to develop its blue economy which will help in creating a livelihood, obtain energy security and creating ecological resilience in Indian Ocean Region. Apart from the same in order to secure its maritime boundaries its relationship with countries sharing maritime boundary have to be strong, resilient and all weather.
- India because being a land locked country from North, West and Eastern direction needs to fill the vacuum on its maritime boundaries before same is exploited by China by its hegemonic diplomacy and economic and military takeover of Nations through BRI initiatives.
- Apart from economy India needs to develop connectivity with its neighbours in the region to provide humanitarian assistance in times of need like natural disaster and actions against non-state actors.
- In last two decades, though India has been able to realise the importance of countries in Indian Ocean Region and re-align its interest through Look East Policy but it is too little and less. Our engagement to these nations has been more reactive than pro-active. India needs to understand that most of these countries in the region are small and developing which is always looking forward to bigger economies like India and China.
- India Middle East European Corridor (IMEC) is being seen as counter to Chinese BRI initiative. By SAGAR policies India can facilitate connectivity of smaller economies in Indian Ocean Region to the rest of the world like Middle East, Israel, Europe and USA.

Challenges to the SAGAR Doctrine and India's Act East Policy

The biggest challenge to SAGAR doctrine is India's inability to engage ASEAN countries in the region as a trusted neighbour on economic, diplomatic and military fronts. Since Independence and during Cold War era India neglected its maritime neighbours because of its alignment with USSR. India in spite of its old cultural and trade relations could not leverage the gains in its favour. As late as early nineties India's commitment to its neighbours in IOR was below average. Potential of these nations were realised once Chinese influence in the region was visible in terms of string of pearls and BRI initiatives. The speed of development projects, diplomatic stand on their issues on world forum, financial assistance and fence sitter attitude of India has forced ASEAN countries, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh to look for other options like China. Therefore, the biggest challenge to the SAGAR policy is India's inhibition to project its diplomatic, socio-cultural and military strength in the region. Recent paradigms shift from 'Look East' to 'Act East' policy by Modi Government is the correct step in right direction but still lot needs to be done that too on fast track before the vacuum is occupied by someone as China did in Sri Lanka and recently India losing ground in Malasiya to China. Besides, SAGAR policy envisages engagement with multiple players, duplication of efforts and actions, and regional dependence on international maritime powers. Besides, maritime resources will be overexploited by multiple players in the region.

Conclusion

India's SAGAR Doctrine is the need of the hour for India which needs to be crafted very carefully by formulating a governance framework under United Nation Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). It also needs to focus on special regional organisations like Indian Ocean Rim Association which focuses of sustainable growth and balanced development in the region. Special regional cooperation programme on Blue Economy should be planned by all regional partners in IOR. Currently, world sees India as a "Vishwaguru" and its democratic, diplomatic, consultative, fair and impartial leadership can facilitate the security and sustainable growth to all in the region in true sense.