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SAGAR – A DECADE OF INDIA'S MARITIME VISION AND THE WAY AHEAD

Anil Chawla

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced India’s vision of ‘[Security and Growth for All in the Region](#)’ (SAGAR) during the commissioning ceremony of an Indian-built Offshore Patrol Vessel, MCG *Barracuda*, for the National Coast Guard (NCG) of Mauritius at Port Louis in March 2015. Prime Minister Modi returned to Mauritius this month to mark the 10th anniversary of the pronouncement, where he noted that Mauritius stood at the junction of India’s Vision SAGAR and its commitment to the Global South. While much effort has gone into translating Vision SAGAR into concrete actions over the past decade, much has also changed in the geopolitical environment in the IOR and across the world. This essay examines what has been achieved and proposes some measures to further build upon SAGAR in the decade ahead.

BEGINNINGS WITH ‘LOOK EAST’

It is important to remember that SAGAR was preceded by several maritime policy initiatives in the post-Cold War era, starting with the Look East policy in 1991. The resulting maritime defence and economic partnerships catalysed the formation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), both in 1997. The Indian Navy’s (*IN*) growing role as a force for good in the IOR received global recognition in the aftermath of its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) efforts in the devastating wake of the 2004 tsunami. Building upon its strong foundation of regional maritime cooperation, the *IN* initiated the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the first multilateral maritime military construct in the IOR, in 2008, which today brings together 35 navies in the region. Proof of India’s growing engagement and influence in the IOR was evident from then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s statement in 2013, ‘Our defence cooperation has grown and today we have unprecedented access to high technology, capital and partnerships. We have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond’.

‘ACT EAST’ AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

Over the past decade, bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the IOR has gathered more wind in its sails. *Mausam*, a cultural project to connect countries that lie along the ancient maritime trading routes based on the monsoon winds, was launched in April 2014. The ‘Look East’ policy was upgraded to the ‘Act East’ policy in November 2014 and new life was breathed into BIMSTEC consequent to India accepting the award of the *International Tribunal on the Maritime Boundary Arbitration between India and Bangladesh* in July 2014. Relations with Australia were reset with bilateral visits by both Prime Ministers in 2014 – the visit by the Indian Prime Minister to Australia happening after a gap of 28 years. SAGAR was, of course, announced in 2015, which effectively linked maritime cooperation, maritime security and sustainable economic development.

India’s maritime vision expanded substantially with the enunciation of the Indo-Pacific concept, which gained global traction after the Trump Administration included it in its *National Security Strategy in December 2017*. The Indo-Pacific concept recognises the salience of India in the vast maritime region that extends from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the Americas. India has embraced the Indo-Pacific construct with its vision of a ‘free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region built on a rules-based international order, sustainable and transparent infrastructure investment, freedom of navigation and over-flight, unimpeded lawful commerce, mutual respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, as well as equality of all nations’. To give concrete shape to *India’s Indo-Pacific Vision*, Prime Minister Modi announced the *Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative* (IPOI) in 2019, which envisages multilateral cooperation in this vast oceanic region under seven pillars:

maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building & resource sharing, disaster risk reduction & management, science, technology & academic cooperation and trade, connectivity & maritime transport.

CHINA’S IMPACT

Over the decade that SAGAR was announced, transformative changes have taken place across the region, with China’s increasing maritime power and presence in the IOR being the major factor. China’s [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), announced in 2015, especially its maritime leg, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), has provided unprecedented maritime (and other) infrastructure funding to countries in the IOR, increasing both its political influence and economic involvement in the region on a long-term basis. The establishment of the first Chinese overseas maritime base in Djibouti in 2017, with more expected to follow in the years ahead, has further changed maritime security dynamics in the region. The [Chinese Navy is now the largest maritime force in the world](#) with a substantial presence in the IOR, which presents new challenges to India’s maritime security. Besides strengthening strategic ties with IOR littorals, especially in India’s neighbourhood and in Africa, China or is also an observer or dialogue partner in multilateral IOR organisations, even establishing a ‘[China-Indian Ocean Forum](#)’ in 2022, focused on blue economy development in IOR countries. The Ukraine War has benefited China, due to the diversion of forces and funds by the US from the Indo-Pacific to support Ukraine, thereby giving China greater space in the region. The current isolationist tendency of the second Trump

Administration will further benefit China, as it is well-placed to step into spaces vacated by the US, with its only major competitor in the IOR being India.

The tenth anniversary of Vision SAGAR is an occasion to further build upon the gains thus far in the IOR under India’s benign leadership. The bilateral and multilateral mechanisms for cooperation established by India in the region need to be leveraged astutely towards this end.

It is, therefore, evident, that China is the definitive maritime challenge for India in the second half of the 21st century. India’s major advantage lies in its geographic centrality in the Indian Ocean, which links the region’s destiny inexorably with India. However, geography cannot be the sole factor to ensure India’s pre-eminence. Instead, its geographical advantage needs to be astutely conjoined with India’s proud record of benign leadership in the region. Under the rubric of SAGAR, existing

bilateral and multilateral mechanisms in the IOR need to be leveraged towards this aim.

India’s [Enhanced Strategic Partnership](#) with Mauritius, which includes defence and maritime security cooperation, infrastructure development, economic & trade relations, marine transportation, connectivity, medical & education cooperation and cultural engagement, is an exemplar that needs to be emulated for bilateral relations with other key IOR littorals, particularly Australia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and UAE. While requiring to be tailored to the specific needs of each country, initiatives undertaken by India in the areas of maritime security, HADR, infrastructure development, trade, blue economy and connectivity provide a ready foundation to build such partnerships.

In the multilateral context, IORA has an important role to play. ‘[IORA Vision 2030 and Beyond](#)’, adopted in 2023, is a strategic roadmap for the future, aimed at a more peaceful, stable and prosperous IOR. This is sought to be achieved by enhancing cooperation in its six focus areas – maritime safety & security, trade & investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, science & technology cooperation and tourism & cultural exchanges – and the two cross-cutting issues, women’s economic empowerment and blue economy. These focus areas offer a ready smorgasbord for multilateral cooperation.

An important step to strengthen maritime security mechanisms in the IOR would be to link IONS with the ‘maritime security & safety’ focus area of IORA. This would enable the already well-integrated key areas

of IONS – Information Security and Interoperability, HADR and Maritime Security – with similar initiatives under IORA. Such cooperation needs to ultimately translate into a multilateral maritime ‘force-in-being’ for the IOR with a mandate to handle maritime security issues (such as piracy, maritime terrorism, drug and arms smuggling, IUU fishing and HADR), as agreed upon by either all, or a group of IORA member states.

In its ‘Outlook for the Indo-Pacific’, adopted in November 2022, IORA stated its desire to work with countries of the Indo-Pacific region in its six focus areas and two cross-cutting issues. The seven pillars of the IPOI already have ‘lead countries’ to steer each pillar. In a similar manner, lead countries need to be nominated for the IORA’s focus and cross-cutting issues to progress them at a faster pace. In addition, mechanisms already existing under the Global Biofuels Alliance, International Solar Alliance, and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure also need to be conjoined and progressed as part of IORA’s agenda. IORA’s progress has been stymied in the past by a severe lack of resources and inadequate follow-up on agreed action plans. India’s forthcoming leadership of IORA from 2025-27 offers an opportunity to galvanise cooperation between IORA partner countries and needs to be well utilised.

It is important to remember that peace and security in the Indian Ocean is critical for the economic prosperity and social stability of the region (and beyond). This is the larger goal that SAGAR’s inclusive vision seeks to accomplish, by enhancing the economic, infrastructural and defence capabilities of India’s neighbours through a collaborative and sustainable approach, while respecting international legal regimes.

India's regional leadership at this critical juncture can make this possible.



Vice Admiral AK Chawla, PVSM, AVSM, NM, VSM, PhD (Retd.) is the former Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Naval Command and a Distinguished Fellow at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research