

India's Maritime Diplomacy (SAGAR Policy as the focal point)

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Introduction

Maritime Diplomacy is the management of international relations by a nation through the activities in oceanic waters, primarily aimed at deploying its navy, coast guards or other maritime constabulary, thus taking the leverage of the *Sea Power* for gaining favourable diplomatic outcomes in alignment with the foreign and defence policies of a nation. It is an orchestration of sea power with the forces at the nation's disposal to send signals to friendly, non-friendly and neutral countries about the intent of the nation backed up by its economic and military capacity and capability to the extent it can seamlessly employ all its instruments of power.

Maritime diplomacy encompasses a spectrum of activities to pursue the national interests that may be to safeguard and protect its territorial waters or play a bigger role in the dynamics of the regional or global balance of power. Accordingly, the navy will play a role in the state mechanisms. Maritime diplomacy can be cooperative, persuasive, coercive or hybrid.

A **Cooperative Maritime Diplomacy** focuses on garnering the support of other countries through its activities involving Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR), joint actions against human trafficking, smuggling, piracy and terrorism. This kind of diplomacy will try yielding results through the use of limited force where necessary and project the maritime force's presence at other regions and work towards multi-lateral coalitions.

A **Persuasive Maritime Diplomacy** aims to instill in other countries' a sense of maritime force's presence through sea-port visits, joint naval exercises, military deployments etc.

A **Coercive Maritime Diplomacy** involves the use of coercion outside of war by the navies to influence the target littoral nations to make them understand that their interests lie in following and implementing the dictates and instructions

India's Maritime Diplomacy

In today's geo-political scenario, the marine security, maritime commons and cooperation have assumed a lot of importance. India has not had a strong and visible maritime policy and in fact, India has been a dormant player in the Indian Ocean for a very long period. It has been only recently in the last few years India has adopted more pragmatic and responsive maritime policy and strategy in relation to the geo-political realities in the Indian Ocean Region. India must ensure its maritime security, fructification of economic

aspiration and become from putative regional power to one definite and mighty power in the IOR. That is possible but not without the bold, dynamic, resourceful and collaborative maritime policy.

PM Modi delivered a keynote address at the IISS (International Institute for Strategic Studies) in Singapore on June 1st, 2018 and articulated India's vision towards Indo-Pacific region based on five S' in Hindi: Samman (respect), Samvad (dialogue), Sahyog (cooperation), Shanti (peace) and Samridhi (prosperity). And thus he has set the stage for us to play a larger role in Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean region (IOR).

India is a vast country with having coastline of about 7500km, 1200 islands and EEZ of 2000000 square km. Indian navy is the fifth largest in the world, it protects the country's maritime borders and helps in the expansion of its forces. The raison d'être of Indian Navy is to ensure that no hostile maritime power degrades its own national security and interests.

As per the Indian Navy, ***naval diplomacy entails the use of naval forces in support of foreign policy objectives to build 'bridges of friendship' and strengthen international cooperation, on one hand, and to signal capability and intent to deter potential adversaries, on the other.*** The attributes of navy viz access, mobility, reach, sustenance, flexibility and versatility are the tools for pursuing our foreign policy goals. The visibility and intensity of the naval forces can be calibrated as per the requirements of the missions.

The geo-political landscape of the Indo-Pacific region has been dynamic in nature and has gained significant importance in the last decade because of its trade and strategic importance. There is an interplay of several interests, conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region, China is being more assertive with its presence and increasing its influence in Indian Ocean to control vital strategic chokepoints, keep SLOC (Sea Lanes of Communication) open and influence the littoral states as per the its designs and strategy; **QUAD** (an informal strategic forum comprising four nations, USA, India, Japan & Australia) has designs to extend its role; **AUKUS** (a formal strategic alliance and a trilateral security pact between USA, UK and Australia to counter China's claims and influence the region by equipping Australia with nuclear powered submarines) has added another dimension in the region; and a number of other littoral states like Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam, etc. in the Eastern Indo-Pacific region and South Africa, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Tanzania, UAE, Oman, Yemen etc. in Western Indo-Pacific region have their stakes in this region, this all adds up making the region highly complex and dynamic.

India has to be fully prepared to respond to China's increasing footprints in the region, and the ramifications of the strategic positions adopted by AUKUS, as also activities taking place in the region by different nations and accordingly shape its maritime policy.

SAGAR initiative taken by India is a step forward to be more responsive towards the geo-political matrix of the Indo-Pacific region and assert its presence in a more convincing and planned manner.

SAGAR Initiative

The **SAGAR (Security & Growth for all in the region)** initiative was put on the table in March 2015 by Prime Minister Modi to strengthen economic and security ties with its

maritime neighbours as also to make Indian Ocean Region to become more inclusive, collaborative and with nations respecting international law. It involves our maritime forces to collaborate on information sharing, help the other littoral nations in coastline surveillance, and infrastructure development including deep seaports, capability enhancement through maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.

SAGAR initiative will help in stymie the increasing influence of China in IOR. The '**String of Pearls**' strategy has been taken into the folds of the **Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)** by China and it is increasing its footprints in the Indian Ocean making maritime silk route. It is investing heavily and fostering collaboration with the littoral states on the SLOC to keep its maritime interests protected and enhance influence in these states. The route runs from the Chinese coast to Hanoi, Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Strait of Malacca, Colombo, Male, Mombasa, Djibouti and then through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. It encompasses almost the whole portion of SLOC in the Indian Ocean. China's heavy investments in the modern maritime silk route have underpinnings not only of commercial but also largely towards strategic and military. India has to stymie China's influence by increasing its presence in neighbouring countries to upgrade and modernise its sea-related projects as also by modernising our navy on a fast track.

SAGAR will help in **leveraging our blue economy** to help us in achieving socio-economic goals. **The blue economy** refers to the sustainable use of oceanic resources for better economic growth, healthy ecosystem and socially beneficial with improved livelihoods and employment opportunities. Indian Ocean Region is full of resources particularly in sectors pertaining to renewable energy, fisheries, aquaculture, sea-bed mining and minerals, maritime transport, tourism, climate change, and waste management. Hence, India must capitalise on its vast coastline as also with members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, be collaborative and visible for sustainable use of Indian Ocean resources, thus leveraging the blue diplomacy.

Under the **Sagarmala Project**, the Ministry of Shipping plans to revitalise the creaking maritime infrastructure primarily the ports and cargo handling capacity. The project envisages massive infrastructure spending to upgrade major seaports, improve in-land navigable waterways, capacity enhancement, modernisation and port-led industrial development. This project thus can be seen as to give the necessary push to the SAGAR initiative for trade and businesses to flourish. And the other countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Oman and Iran can be helped for development of maritime infrastructure.

Mission Sagar was launched under the Vision SAGAR during COVID first wave and provided Covid 19 related assistance to the countries in IOR. The assistance included supplies of food items, medicines, vaccines and deployment of Medical Assistance Teams. It was a good unitive to engage neighbouring countries in times of crisis.

SAGAR policy must work through the channels of regional organisations like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), ASEAN (Association of South East Nations), IOC (Indian Ocean Commission) & IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association).

India became a member of IOC in March 2020. India and the member countries will be benefitted with the admission of India as a member. India will have better engagements with the member nations, can improve its naval presence, will boost India's influence in the

Western Indian Ocean and will help India to enhance cooperation with France as it has a strong influence in the Western Indian Ocean.

The SAGAR Initiative lays stress over the role of IORA as the facilitator of trade and fisheries management. India must participate proactively in existing and future plans of IORA including training and capacity building programmes, establishing Centres of Excellence for maritime safety & Security, exploring regional surveillance networks, sharing data on maritime transpiration systems. This will give a boost to strengthening ties with individual members of IORA.

Concluding Remarks & Way Ahead

Though the strategic vision behind the SAGAR initiative is laudable, no official document on the doctrine till date has been promulgated by the Government. That remains a big void in full comprehension of the vision. India with its geo-strategic location in the Indian Ocean is a natural and prime actor in this region and thus it must leverage this to become a prominent regional player in IOR and influence the present and future trajectory of maritime stability in this region.

SAGAR Initiative has to be given a much larger push than the Sagarmala project that focuses only on internal port infrastructure development. This will keep our vision focused. Under the overall umbrella of SAGAR vision, all the potential linkages should operate seamlessly so that to give a boost to the blue economy that in turn will put Indian economic growth in higher trajectory; seaport development to enhance our capability and gain the trust of countries; ocean resource conservation to rally our ideas in international fora and give assurances of our part of sustainable development.

For a putative regional power, India must first tweak the importance of maritime diplomacy in the corridors of power in Delhi and start giving the shape to all its projects under the SAGAR Initiative that will involve help in developing and modernising the maritime infrastructure of neighbouring countries including seaports, explore the opportunities and strengthen the blue economy, be a dynamic player in the Indo-Pacific region's geo-political matrix. This is all part of the strategic expenditure that though may not give tangible results to the government forthwith but the returns to India per se will be much higher in the future.