

Revisiting ‘SAGAR’ – India’s Template for Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region

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The month of March 2018 marks three years since the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi first enunciated India’s vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) commonly known by its acronym - SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). In a well thought out strategic move, Modi first spoke about SAGAR, not in India but in Mauritius. Since then, every discourse on India’s foreign policy, including maritime policy, necessarily finds a mention of SAGAR.

This issue brief revisits SAGAR and examines its main policy statements. In doing so, the essay seeks to understand the manner in which these proposals were breaking new ground.

SAGAR – India’s Vision for the Indian Ocean Region

On 12 March 2015, the Indian Prime Minister Modi addressed the National Assembly of Mauritius to commemorate the island nations Independence Day.¹ Interestingly, Modi spoke about SAGAR that very day, but not in the Mauritius National Assembly. He did so on the occasion of the commissioning of the Indian built Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in the service of the National Coast Guard of Mauritius. This OPV would be used by Mauritius to police its vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ) against piracy, smuggling, and illegal fishing, drug trafficking and provide logistical support for search and rescue operations.

The OPV CGS Barracuda was the first ever warship built in India for export, based on the specific design requirements of the buyer country, which in this case was Mauritius. It was built by India’s defence PSU (Public Sector Undertaking) Garden Reach Ship Builders and Engineers Limited (GRSE) in Kolkata.² It symbolised a new beginning for India’s defence industry sales; and the ships final destination being Mauritius indicated the island nation’s geo-strategic importance in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean has over forty littoral states bearing over 40 per cent of the world's population. It is through the IOR that two-thirds of the world's oil shipments; one-third of the world's bulk cargo; and half of the world's container traffic transit. Also 90 per cent of India's trade by volume and 90 per cent of its energy imports transit through these waters. Peace and security in the Indian Ocean is thus critical for both economic prosperity and social stability of most nations in the world, including India.

Modi christened India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region as SAGAR which in the Indian language of Hindi means the 'sea' and when expanded, stands for – Security and Growth for All in the Region. According to this vision³, India would do everything to safeguard its mainland and islands and defend its interests. Further, India will also work to ensure a safe, secure and stable IOR. Though the Prime Minister did not elaborate, it is implied that these interests include the safety and security of Indian shipping, fishing, seaborne trade, energy supply, assets and resources in the maritime domain and Indian citizens who are working overseas. Given the seamless connectivity in the maritime domain, instabilities anywhere would impact on India's maritime security too. As per SAGAR, India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities. For this, India would cooperate on the exchange of information, coastal surveillance, building of infrastructure and strengthening their capabilities. Next, India believes that it is only through collective, collaborative and cooperative approaches that peace can be advanced in the region. In this context, an association like IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium), an Indian initiative established in 2008 and which brings together 35 navies (or coast-guards) in the region; and the India-Sri Lanka-Maldives Trilateral established in 2013 are important. Such mechanisms strengthen efforts to counter non-State actors engaged in piracy, terrorism and other crimes as also natural disasters. Further, India seeks an integrated approach and cooperative future, which will result in sustainable development for all in the region. India opines that the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has an important role to play in this context. Bringing out the importance and centrality of the 'Blue Economy' to India, the Indian Prime Minister said that the blue chakra or wheel in India's national flag represents the potential of the Blue Revolution or Ocean Economy. Lastly, Modi stated that those who are resident in the region, i.e., the littoral countries have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. With other nations who have strong stakes in the region, India engages through dialogue, visits, naval exercises, capacity building, capability enhancement, and economic

partnerships. Prime Minister Modi categorically stated that India stands for respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries and the peaceful resolution of maritime issues.

SAGAR therefore was an inclusive vision with politico-economic-security cooperation and respect for international maritime laws as the key words.

SAGAR - Breaking new ground

This section analyses the manner in which SAGAR was an important landmark in India's maritime diplomacy. First, by choosing to speak from Mauritius and not India, Modi was addressing all the littoral countries of the IOR. The policy proposals spelt out in SAGAR were not entirely a break from the past. However, they were presented as a cohesive organic whole for the first time. SAGAR effectively demonstrated the linkage between maritime cooperation, maritime security and economic development. The result was an Indian vision and initiative for the Indian Ocean region which was inclusive, collaborative and respected international law.

Second, while defence and security relations had been important pillars of bilateral cooperation with some of the IOR countries like Seychelles, Mauritius and Maldives⁴; India now intended to expand strategic partnerships with other IOR littorals in Asia and Africa too and SAGAR provided the mechanism to do so.⁵

Third, through SAGAR, India wanted to stress the relevance of regional mechanisms involving exclusively the uniformed personnel as well as the governmental level. In this context SAGAR stressed the critical role of IONS, an Indian initiative which had 35 navies as its members; and IORA, established in 1997 to facilitate and promote economic cooperation. It is important to note that at the IORA Council of Ministers meeting held in November 2011 in India, the association decided to focus on six specific areas. These were maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk management, science & technology cooperation, and lastly tourism and cultural exchanges⁶. These six areas indicated a holistic and integrated approach to development in the IOR.

Fourth, it was during Modi's three nation bilateral visits to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in March 2015 that the SAGAR vision was first shared with the world. These official visits were important because, an Indian Prime Minister was making a bilateral visit to Seychelles after 34 years, to Mauritius after 10 years and to

Sri Lanka after 28 years. By undertaking these visits, Modi emphasised India's commitment at the highest political level to peace, stability and development in the IOR. Modi's visits underlined that maritime co-operation is a by-product of strong bilateral relations. SAGAR indicated to the leadership role and responsibilities India was ready to take in the region on a long-term basis in a transparent manner through its capacity building and capability enhancement programs. Following SAGAR, many bilateral visits were undertaken by the apex Indian leadership including the President, Vice-President and Prime Minister to the Indian Ocean littoral countries wherein maritime cooperation was stressed. In fact, the Indian President Ram Nath Kovind was on a bilateral official visit to Mauritius and Madagascar from 11-15 March 2018. Significantly, his first bilateral official visit abroad, upon taking over as the 14th President of India was to the Indian Ocean littoral- Djibouti. This visit was undertaken in October 2107.

Fifth, to understand the manner in which SAGAR breaks new ground, it needs to be examined not in isolation but as part of a larger set of events, all of which indicate to India's maritime resurgence. Some of the important events which preceded SAGAR included India's Look East Policy being upgraded to Act East Policy in November 2014; India accepting the award of the International Tribunal on the Maritime Boundary Arbitration between India and Bangladesh in July 2014 and thereby demonstrating that it is a law abiding country⁷; Project Mausam which focused on maritime heritage and maritime routes being announced in June 2014.⁸ Some of the events which followed SAGAR included Modi's June 2015 bilateral visit to Bangladesh with maritime cooperation as an area of focus wherein blue economy, coastal shipping and maritime security were discussed; India's initiative to invigorate new life into BIMSTEC; the first edition of the maritime exercise between the Indian and Australian navies called AUSINDEX being held off the coast of Visakhapatnam in the Bay of Bengal in September 2015; an International Fleet Review (IFR) conducted by the Indian Navy at Visakhapatnam in February 2016 wherein 50 countries participated; release of the SAGARMALA Perspective Plan in April 2016⁹ which seeks to accelerate economic development in the country by harnessing the potential of India's coastline and river network; the USA-Japan-India trilateral Malabar naval exercises took place off the coast of India in July 2017; further at all forums India focused on the potential of Blue Economy ; and also that India is a 'net maritime security provider' in the Indian Ocean Region.¹⁰

Sixthly, post-SAGAR, India actively continued to pursue its program of capacity building initiatives in the IOR. For example on 16 August 2017 the Indian

built Water Jet Fast Patrol Vessel CGS Valiant was commissioned into Mauritius National Coast Guard; in March 2016, ten fast interceptor boats had been inducted; and in December 2016 CGS Victory was commissioned and two Chetak helicopters were inducted¹¹. In September 2017, India handed over Indian Coast Guard Ship Varuna to Sri Lanka. The ship was re-christened as Suraksha and commissioned into the Sri Lankan Coast Guard in October 2017.¹² In Seychelles the Coastal Surveillance Radar System was operationalised in March 2016. Here too patrol vessels gifted by India help safeguard their vast EEZ.¹³ India also concluded agreements on defence cooperation with the Indian Ocean littorals in Africa.

Lastly and most significantly, SAGAR brought to focus the increasing critical role that the Coast Guard agencies of the Indian Ocean littorals will play in ensuring security of their respective vast EEZs for facilitating economic activities based on blue economy. The Abu Dhabi declaration of January 2014 on Blue Economy highlighted the contribution of fisheries in providing food security and sustainable livelihoods; marine based tourism as a source of decent employment and contribution to poverty alleviation; ocean as a source of hydrocarbon and mineral resources and; ocean as the primary medium of global trade through shipping and port facilities¹⁴. SAGAR too has prioritised Blue Economy. A multiplication of activities related to Blue economy will call for a more vigilant and efficient role of the coast guard agencies of the IOR littorals. For, only when maritime security is assured that Blue Economy which is both capital and skill intensive will be able to attract the required investments.

SAGAR was a response to the harsh reality that instability in the maritime environment anywhere would not enhance India's own maritime security and its national interests. SAGAR therefore sought to create and shape a positive and favourable maritime environment.

Conclusion

SAGAR propelled maritime issues to the centre of India's foreign policy. It filled a serious policy vacuum and highlighted the critical interdependent link between maritime security, maritime cooperation and blue economy.

SAGAR, however, could have been enunciated only by a country having a strong navy. Thus, while SAGAR resonates a benign vision, it is also in the same breadth a policy of naval power projection. Ironically, it is also an admission of the fact that

given the nature of the maritime medium, it is only through cooperation and collaboration with other littorals that any strong navy can effectively discharge its duties.

The critical relevance of SAGAR emerges when seen in conjunction with India's other policies impacting the maritime domain like Act East Policy, SAGARMALA, Project Mausam, India as 'net security provider', focus on Blue Economy etc which symbolise India's maritime resurgence. SAGAR contributes to the effective implementation of all these policies by acting as an enabler to create a positive environment in the IOR.

The paper proposes two initiatives which can make SAGAR more effective. First, with the focus on blue economy in all the Indian Ocean littorals, maritime security in the EEZ is a concern for all. In this context the role of the Coast Guard Agencies in all the Indian Ocean littorals becomes critical and will continue to expand. In this context it is important to note that since 1991, the coast guard agencies of India and Maldives have been conducting bi-annual exercises called DOSTI. In 2012, this was expanded to include Sri Lanka and is referred to as Trilateral Joint Coast Guard Exercises (Tri-DOSTI). Following SAGAR, this should now be expanded to include the coast guard agencies of the IOR littorals from Asia and Africa which number over 40. Coast guards are perceived more benign as compared to navies. The interactions among the coast guard agencies of these countries will help in augmenting the operational level interaction and capacity building in areas of search and rescue, pollution response, maritime law enforcement, maritime safety and security at sea, sharing of best management practises, and training of personnel through exchange programs. It is important to note here that IORA has only 21 members and many geo-strategically located IOR countries are not its members. Expanding Tri-DOSTI will overcome this limitation too.

Secondly, at the 1st IORA Leaders' Summit in Jakarta held in March 2017, India had said that it would be happy to share its hydrological capability with the member states to enable better navigation and understanding of marine topography.¹⁵ India has been assisting some of the IOR countries bilaterally in this field and preparing hydrological charts. The same should now be institutionalised so that India's expertise in this field can reach all the IOR littorals in a structured manner irrespective of the nature of bilateral relations. Both the above initiatives will result in win-win scenarios.

However, SAGAR is most effective in a scenario of positive bilateralism. Presently India-Maldives relations are going through a difficult phase¹⁶. A few hiccups have also arisen regarding India's infrastructural developmental activities in the strategically located island nation of Seychelles which need to be addressed.¹⁷ Sustaining positive bilateral relations on a long-term basis with the Indian Ocean littorals will be a major challenge in implementing SAGAR. It is in such a scenario that the role of the political leadership in India becomes crucial to keep up the momentum of cooperation.

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