



Modi's Maritime Diplomacy: A Strategic Opportunity

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This paper examines the maritime diplomacy of India's Prime Minister Modi, and argues that it is encapsulated in the acronym SAGAR, i.e. security and growth for all in the region. This vision also spells out that maritime security is the primary responsibility of the littoral states, while stressing cooperation and collaboration. It also highlights aspects of the Blue Economy and suggests that SAGAR is nonassertive, seeks peaceful resolution of disputes and calls for a commitment by all countries to adhere to international maritime laws. The paper argues that India conducts its maritime diplomacy at three levels which give it a "strategic strength". They are: high-level bilateral visits where strategic issues are an important component; regional collaborative means; and, lastly, revitalizing the cultural and civilisational links with projects such as "Project Mausam". The paper concludes that the International Fleet Review to be held at Vishakhapatnam in 2016 gives India a "strategic opportunity" to contribute to a maritime narrative which may be able to address the mistrust in the current global maritime order.

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Introduction

This paper examines maritime diplomacy as practiced by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi since it came to power in May 2014. The paper argues that Modi's maritime diplomacy occupies an important place in his overall foreign policy¹ and is conducted at three levels. First, at the political level, India undertakes visits at the highest level, of both political leaders and government officials. While a wide range of issues are discussed, the security relations, strategic concerns and defense content in these relationships have deepened. Maritime issues are interwoven into these concerns and have been in focus at different times. Second, India aims for a collaborative and cooperative approach to address challenges in the maritime domain. It is actively engaged with regional institutions and regional mechanisms which deal with maritime issues either exclusively or as part of a broader set of issues. Third, at the cultural level, specific projects have been initiated where the focus is on maritime linkages, such as the "Spice Route Project" and "Project Mausam". These focus on the shared maritime history between India and other countries. Thus, cultural diplomacy is used as soft power where the dominant narrative is about maritime history.

This paper makes three submissions. First, that maritime diplomacy conducted at these three levels will give India a "strategic strength" which is not directed at any particular country and is nonassertive. Such diplomacy projects India as a benign power, high on morals and adhering to maritime laws. This approach meets India's national interest with regard to the maritime domain. The success of this approach will, however, depend on the nature of bilateral relations and the manner in which the policies are implemented at all three levels. Second, the paper argues that the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2016, to be held in Visakhapatnam, brings together all three mechanisms of maritime diplomacy on one stage and projects India's "maritime narrative" at the international scene, bringing forth its merits which lie in culture, collaboration, cooperation, capability and adherence to a code of conduct at sea. Third, it is observed that maritime diplomacy is conducted with an undercurrent of mistrust at the international level, but IFR 2016 provides India a "strategic opportunity" to contribute to building trust in the comity of nations.

In the above context, the paper delineates the main streams of India's maritime diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region. The next section examines the dominant ideas of India's maritime diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific Region, which includes

countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region and also the Pacific Island countries. The paper also spells out the regional mechanisms involving India, to further its maritime interests, and briefly brings out the salient aspects of Project Mausam and the Spice Route Project. The paper concludes by highlighting the significance of IFR 2016.

India's Maritime Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region: SAGAR and Security

The Indian Ocean Region has over 40 littoral countries and nearly 40% of the world population. Prime Minister Modi's diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region did not begin with his three-nation tour to the nearest Indian Ocean neighbours of Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka; rather, it began when Mauritius was the only country apart from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries to be invited to the oath-taking ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on May 26, 2014. Prime Minister Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam of Mauritius attended the ceremony, and his presence symbolised not only the historical relations of common ancestry and kinship but also the shared views among others in the field of maritime security, and the importance of the Indian Ocean Region.²

It was during the visits to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka during March 10–14, 2015,³ that Prime Minister Modi enunciated his Indian Ocean policy, which he termed "SAGAR", i.e. security and growth for all in the region. This policy has been reiterated by other Indian ministers and officials at various forums.⁴ There are a number of salient aspects of this policy; first, India will do everything to safeguard its sovereignty and to defend its interests. Equally, India will also work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean and to use its capabilities for the benefit of all in the region. Second, India will deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and island states, and assist in building their maritime security capabilities. Third, India believes that collective action and cooperation will best advance peace and security in the maritime region. The collective mechanisms will deepen mutual understanding on maritime challenges and the collective ability to address them.⁵ These mechanisms will also strengthen efforts to counter nonstate actors engaged in piracy, terrorism and other crimes. India will also help to respond to issues of safety and actions to be undertaken during natural disasters. Fourth, India will seek an integrated approach and cooperative future which will result in

sustainable development for all in the region. Thus, the focus will be on the Ocean Economy or Blue Economy which will promote greater collaboration in trade, tourism and investment, infrastructure development, marine science and technology, sustainable fisheries and protection of the marine environment. In this context, the issues of climate change assume importance as it is a serious threat to the very existence of those who live along the oceans and seas. Fifth, those who live in this region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. India recognises that there are other nations around the world with strong interests and stakes in the region, and India engages them through dialogue, visits, naval exercises, capacity building and economic partnerships. According to SAGAR, India seeks a climate of trust and transparency, respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries, sensitivity to each other's interests, peaceful resolution of maritime issues and increase in maritime cooperation.

Thus, the policies as encapsulated in SAGAR spell out maritime security as the main theme for which littorals are primarily responsible. These are an inclusive set of policies in which India, as one of the littorals, will assist other countries through capacity building and capability enhancement so that they can address their security concerns. Security also includes economic security, and in this direction opportunities put forward by the Ocean Economy or Blue Economy will be explored. The underlying theme of all this is cooperation and collaboration. Thus, the policy is not assertive and seeks commitment by all countries to adhere to maritime laws and internationally accepted norms.

In the above context of capacity building, India has assisted Seychelles by setting up a coastal surveillance radar system which Prime Minister Modi inaugurated. Four agreements were also signed for development of infrastructure facilities at Assumption Island, a renewal of energy cooperation, cooperation in hydrography and the sale of navigational charts. The two countries also decided to set up a Joint Working Group on Cooperation in Blue Economy. A decision was also taken by India to gift a second Dornier aircraft to Seychelles.⁶ These relations were taken forward during the visit of the Seychelles President to India in August 2015.⁷ Similarly, India assisted in capacity building of Mauritius when Prime Minister Modi commissioned the off-shore patrol vessel *Barracuda* which is the first custom-built defence vessel exported by India. The prime minister also announced a concessional line of credit of US\$ 500 million for a project to be identified by the Government of Mauritius. Other bilateral agreements which were signed included development of sea and air transportation facilities at Agalega Island, cooperation in the Ocean Economy, cooperation in

traditional systems of medicine and homeopathy, and a cultural exchange programme for 2015–2018.⁸ Interestingly an Indian Prime Minister was visiting Seychelles after 34 years and Mauritius after 10 years.

Unlike Mauritius and Seychelles, where maritime security is one of the major issues, it is observed that India's relations with Sri Lanka are much more complicated. Prime Minister Modi's bilateral visit to Sri Lanka, the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 28 years, helped in discussing political, economic and maritime security issues and to bring the two nations closer. However, given that ethnic issues and fishermen issues are still unresolved and India's domestic politics are closely entangled, other issues take precedence over maritime security.⁹ It is not difficult to decipher that the delay in Modi's visit to Maldives which has not yet taken place is due to the differences between the two countries over the democratic process in Maldives. On the other hand, a new era of cooperation was inaugurated following Modi's visit to Bangladesh which was preceded by the ratification of the land boundary agreement with Bangladesh by India's parliament.¹⁰ Interestingly, the Blue Economy has also been an important issue in India–Bangladesh bilateral relations.

The African countries are important littoral countries in the Indian Ocean. India's engagement with the East African¹¹ countries includes hydrography, Blue Economy, economic cooperation and issues of maritime security. This was evident during the bilateral visits by leaders of Tanzania¹² and Mozambique.¹³ Cooperation in Blue Economy, maritime security, and other areas of common interests will intensify with the 3rd India–Africa Summit in October, 2015 in New Delhi, where India is likely to host all 54 member states of the African Union. The above analysis brings out that SAGAR will be the dominant maritime narrative for India which will guide engagement at both the multilateral and bilateral levels in the Indian Ocean Region.

India's Maritime Diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific: Deepening and Expanding Strategic Partnerships

Since the new government was formed in May 2014, Prime Minister Modi and his team of Ministers and officials have been actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific region. This includes visits to the region at the highest level, which were both bilateral, and attending other multilateral meetings. At all of these occasions, the new economic agenda and the vision of development were unveiled by the Modi government seeking the support of countries and international business to invest in India. The economic programs included

Make in India, Smart Cities, Skill India, Digital India, renewable energy with emphasis on solar energy, the Clean Ganga endeavour, upgrading the manufacturing sector, etc. Modernisation of Indian railways and building new infrastructure projects like roads and ports, and investments in digital infrastructure were flagged. The policy measures were taken with an aim to improve the ease of doing business in India. Thus, increasing economic engagement between India and the region was high on the government's agenda.¹⁴ The second set of issues was the need for collaboration on global issues such as climate change; international terrorism; piracy; disaster management; combating pandemics; cyber, space and maritime security; reform of the United Nations (UN), etc. Thirdly, at the bilateral level, the security, strategic and defence content of the relations have deepened and at times been institutionalised with several countries of the region. These symbolised building strategic partnerships and a convergence of views on security between India and Myanmar, Japan,¹⁵ South Korea, Australia,¹⁶ Singapore, etc.¹⁷ Similarly, leaders of Vietnam, Australia and other countries visited India.¹⁸ Security cooperation also deepened in the regional institutions which deal with security issues. All the three streams – i.e. economic engagement, discussion on issues of global concerns and increased strategic engagements – deepened India's engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. As far as India–US engagement is concerned, President Obama and Prime Minister Modi have expressed concern over issues of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁹ Modi noted that the US is intrinsic to India's Look East and Link West Policies.²⁰ This should be seen in the context of deepening defence ties between the two countries. Reciprocal visits between India and China at the highest level also took place, which brought out the desire for engagement despite differences on certain security issues. The cooperation on the economic agenda was the highlight of the engagements.²¹

With the countries of the Pacific islands, major initiatives have been taken and two multilateral forum meetings have been held. The Summit of the Forum for India Pacific Island Countries (FIPIC) was first held in Suva, Fiji, in November 2014, followed by the second FIPIC in Jaipur, India, in August, 2015.²² The issues debated and discussed included climate change, and the support of India for the Somoa Pathway which refers to the special challenges and needs of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS).²³ India is helping them in both capacity building and capability enhancement.²⁴ Hence, Prime Minister Modi's maritime diplomacy in this area has charted new territory and built new linkages.²⁵

It is interesting to note that deepening India–Australia ties have resulted in their first bilateral naval exercise in Visakhapatnam off the Bay of Bengal in September 2015.

Similarly, the Malabar exercises between India and US will include Japan for the second time. On September 29, 2015, the inaugural US–India–Japan Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue was held in New York, where maritime security was discussed.²⁶ An important question is: Why is this region important to India? The official narrative spelt out in various forums brings out many reasons. Presently, the Asia-Pacific is the most dynamic region and considered the growth engine of the world. However, the region is seeing multi-polarity with the rise of new powers, giving it fluidity and instability. Nearly 50% of India's trade passes through this region, and in a globalised world, India wants to ensure an enabling external environment which is supportive of India's growth, development and security. India's Look East Policy, which has now been upgraded to "Act East", reflects these interests. ASEAN is at the centre of India's Look East policy; it is part of 26 dialogue mechanisms of ASEAN, and in seven areas it interacts at the ministerial level. It also engages in the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum. Meanwhile, the US is stepping up its engagement in the region through its "pivot" policy. India enjoys excellent relations with all 10 ASEAN countries, and with no major irritants. Since 2012, India and ASEAN have been strategic partners, and have increased their interactions on strategic issues. The Asia-Pacific region has complex unresolved questions in the area of security, which merits a serious and sustained dialogue to strengthen understanding and confidence among all stakeholders in the region. Maritime security has therefore become even more important in a globalised world, from which all countries have benefitted.²⁷

In the above context, India's views on maritime security as spelt out by Prime Minister Modi at the East Asia Summit are as follows:

In a world of inter-dependence and globalization, there is no option but to follow international laws and norms. This also applies to maritime security. For this reason, following international law and norms is important for peace and stability in South China Sea as well. This also includes the 1982 UN Convention on Law of the Sea, which should be the basis for resolving disputes peacefully. We also hope that the efforts to conclude a Code of Conduct on South China Sea by a process of consensus would be successful soon.²⁸

India has urged all countries to follow international norms, and has sought a collective and collaborative approach to respond to maritime security challenges. While the official narrative does not refer to assertive actions of China as a factor, the dominant narrative among analysts is that India is building deep strategic linkages in the ASEAN region to counter the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region. An

assertive China has also resulted in concerns about the nature of security architecture that may evolve in the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese maritime and naval activities in the South China Sea have resulted in calls for India's cooperation. There is a dominant view that India should engage with the US and other countries so that seas as global commons are accessible to all. On the other hand, China is of the view that US policies in the Asia-Pacific are singularly aimed to contain its rise; whatever the reasons, there are views that the engagement with China should continue to find a common ground to build mutual trust.²⁹

The Regional Mechanisms for Maritime Cooperation

Prime Minister Modi's maritime diplomacy has repeatedly stressed the importance of collaborative and cooperative approaches. Some of these cooperative mechanisms are: the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), founded in 2008, which is an Indian initiative that seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues. In the process, it endeavours to generate a flow of information between naval professionals that would lead to a common understanding and possibly cooperative solutions on the "way ahead". It has navies of 35 countries participating in its various activities.³⁰ The India–Sri Lanka–Maldives Trilateral was established in 2013 to address common maritime security threats and challenges and to enhance security through cooperative measures. In March 2014, the third National Security Advisor (NSA)-level Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation was held in Delhi where delegations from Mauritius and Seychelles also participated as guest countries.

The Indian Navy's MILAN initiative started in 1995, and witnessed the participation of 17 regional navies in its ninth edition. India started anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden and the sea routes of the Indian Ocean in 2008. It is the founding member of the Contact Group on Piracy which enables member countries to deal with the challenge collectively.³¹ The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), earlier known as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), was formed by Australia, India, Mauritius, Oman, Singapore and South Africa. Though the aim was economic cooperation, not much progress could be achieved. In 2011, six areas of cooperation were identified, which included maritime safety and security, trade and investment facilitation, fisheries management, disaster risk

reduction, academic and science and technology cooperation, tourism promotion and cultural exchanges. The first Indian Ocean Dialogue under IORA was held in September 2014 to specifically discuss the geostrategic significance of the Indian Ocean Region. The aim was to identify the challenges and then build synergies to address them collectively.³² India also conducts bilateral naval exercises with other countries including Australia, the US, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, etc.³³

The Cultural Dimension to the Maritime Narrative

Project 'Mausam': Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes, was launched by India at the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee at Doha, Qatar. One of the main deliverables of this project is the nomination of maritime cultural landscapes across the Indian Ocean as a transnational property on the World Heritage List of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The project can be understood at two levels; at the macro level, it aims to reconnect and reestablish communications between countries of the Indian Ocean Region, which would lead to an enhanced understanding of cultural values and concerns; at the micro level, the focus is on understanding national cultures in their regional maritime milieu. The central themes that hold "Project Mausam" together are those of cultural routes and maritime landscapes which not only linked different parts of the Indian Ocean littoral, but also connected the coastal centres to their hinterlands. More importantly, shared knowledge systems and ideas spread along these routes and impacted both coastal centres, and also large parts of the environs. This multidisciplinary project rekindles past ties and forges new avenues of cooperation and exchange. The "Spice Route" refers to the revival of old links between 31 countries in Asia, the Far East, Africa and Europe with India, particularly spice-rich Kerala.³⁴ Both of these projects have been viewed by many as India's response to growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region. They opine that the projects have a serious strategic dimension but are presented in the form of cultural linkages.³⁵ On the other hand, China has said that it is willing to link its "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative with New Delhi's Spice Route and Mausam projects and bring tangible benefits to the peoples in the two countries and throughout the region. China's belt and road projects aim at connecting China with Europe and Africa by road, rail and sea. This would not only increase China's influence in the region but also revive its economy.³⁶ These projects need to be seen in the context of Prime Minister Modi's government's conduct of foreign policy, where culture

and civilisation are important reference points in every foreign policy initiative. Thus, to term India's Project Mausam as a response to China's OBOR policy will be to overlook the larger foreign policy picture of the Indian government.

Project Mausam in itself is not strategic, but when implemented effectively and combined with other initiatives of the government in the maritime field, especially SAGAR, it has the capacity to be a force multiplier in terms of garnering support for India's maritime narrative. It enriches the maritime heritage of other countries too and therefore gives them ownership to make it a success, as it is collaborative, cooperative and non-assertive. This support for India's maritime narrative gives it its strategic strength.

The Significance of the International Fleet Review (IFR) 2016

The tradition of fleet review began in the 15th century in Great Britain and has since been followed by many countries that possess navies. These events are a show of naval strength, an assurance to the supreme commander that the navy will safeguard the security of the country, and in democracies like India they also symbolise that power lies with the people.³⁷ Traditionally, the president of India reviews the Indian Fleet once during his tenure in office. So far, India has held 10 Presidential Reviews of the Fleet.³⁸ The first IFR in India was held in 2001 in Mumbai on the west coast, in the Arabian Sea.³⁹ The IFR to be held in Visakhapatnam in February 2016 will be the second such event in India. Invitations were sent to over 80 countries, and 40 have confirmed participation.⁴⁰ The theme of IFR 2016 is "Uniting Through Oceans". In the recent past, Australia held an IFR in 2013, to commemorate the centenary of the first entry of the Royal Australian Navy's Fleet into Sydney.⁴¹

IFR 2016 will not only be an occasion to project India's naval power and capability but will also reiterate the salient features of New Delhi's maritime narrative. It will symbolise the high point of India's maritime diplomacy, and it signals the culmination of one phase of Prime Minister Modi's maritime diplomacy and the beginning of another. It will also be an occasion to take stock of the maritime diplomacy conducted so far and to improve on its effectiveness. Since India believes in a collaborative and cooperative approach to meet the challenges of maritime security, IFR 2016 will provide an appropriate platform to reiterate India's commitment to such an approach. The challenge, however, will be to pick the gains made by IFR 2016 and then move ahead with greater vigour to support India's maritime narrative. In that sense, IFR 2016 gives India an opportunity to set the global maritime agenda.

Conclusion

India's maritime diplomacy is based on its policies as encapsulated in SAGAR – which has elements of economic security too, as envisaged in the concept of the Blue Economy: building strategic partnerships with countries for both India's security and its economic development; stressing a collaborative, cooperative approach with respect for international maritime norms and laws to address maritime challenges; and looking to the past with projects Mausam and Spice Route to build linkages in the present. India's maritime narrative has emerged from these policies, has garnered maximum support and has given it a “strategic strength” which is nonassertive but influential.

The timing of IFR 2016, coming as it does when the government will be moving towards completing two years in power, is appropriate. IFR 2016 will showcase India's economic development agenda too, and gives a platform to project its economic and defence capabilities, specifically its naval might. It comes after Prime Minister Modi's visits to many countries, and IFR 2016 and will give an opportunity to rededicate, celebrate and strengthen India's maritime diplomacy and maritime narrative. It will also give an opportunity to critically examine various policies and regional mechanisms of cooperation in the maritime domain, and chart new and relevant agendas for them.

Most significantly, IFR 2016 provides a “strategic opportunity” for India to set the tone of a new vigorous maritime narrative at the global scale. This paper has aptly brought out that there is an undercurrent of mistrust on which maritime diplomacy is played out in the Indian Ocean Region and the Asia-Pacific Region. India should use the platform of IFR 2016 to narrow this mistrust, and build a common agenda of cooperation and trust which can bring forth a convergence of views. India's increasing engagement in the Asia-Pacific and China's engagement in the Indian Ocean Region need to find a common space of trust. A secure maritime environment is essential for India, China and the world. India should use this strategic opportunity as provided by IFR 2016 to come out with unilateral policy proposals, along with welcoming ideas from other countries to build mutual trust among nations.

Notes

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