



MAHASAGAR'S REACH: INDIA'S NEW MARITIME DOCTRINE AND SOUTH CHINA SEA SECURITY

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Photo: Indian Navy ships in the Indian Ocean. Source: Indian Navy

India's articulation of its Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific (FOIIP) has been through its maritime security vision SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which aimed to position New Delhi as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean region. Launched by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, the SAGAR represented New Delhi's maritime doctrine prioritizing inclusive multilateral

cooperation, encompassing maritime security, economic collaboration, regional connectivity, sustainable development, and disaster relief. SAGAR was launched with the dual aim of allowing mutually beneficial blue economy connectivity initiatives for India and its maritime neighbors, while countering the hegemony of the China-led maritime silk road under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with the 2015 Act East Policy aimed at deepening India's ties with East Asia. A decade later in March 2025, India launched the MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) vision that expands the scope of SAGAR to include the wider Global South by addressing traditional and non-traditional security threats, trade and connectivity for development, capacity-building for maritime states, positioning India as a leader for Global South. While Global South concerns are common to SAGAR and MAHASAGAR vision, New Delhi's strengthened presence in the Indian Ocean contrasts sharply with its limited South China Sea engagement. India has also [exercised restraint](#) in expanding influence in the South China Sea, with it being Beijing's strategic backyard, quite unlike its aspirations to be a rising global power. That raises the question, how can India's new maritime policy MAHASAGAR enable an increased visibility in the South China Sea (SCS), and what are the avenues for New Delhi's engagement in the region?

India-China equation in the Himalayas and the maritime security push

While the LAC (Line of Actual Control which represents the unsettled India-China border) has been a contested zone, [India-China bilateral relations](#) have been impacted severely after a series of territorial assertions in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh and aggressions by the Chinese PLA since 2014, causing heavy militarization of the LAC. Similar assertions by the PLA manifested in the South China Sea through increased surveillance, conflicting claims over maritime territories in SCS and conflicts with the [Philippine Coast Guard](#). India's traditional interests in SCS have been economic since India's crucial energy imports pass through the SCS. About 55% of Indian trade passes through the Strait of Malacca, and Indian company ONGC Videsh's joint ventures with Vietnamese firms for oil and gas exploration have made SCS a key region for New Delhi's trade and energy security. However, Beijing's quest for hegemony over the SCS and reawakening of the LAC dispute have kept land and maritime border tensions alive with its South and Southeast Asian neighbors while eroding their trust in China's "peaceful" rise. In

this backdrop, India's response is worth noting, for instance, after the 2017 Doklam standoff with China that lasted over seventy days, India responded in the South China Sea by initiating [naval exercises with Vietnam](#) (2018), and conducted a passage exercise with its vessel INS Kiltan in 2020 while providing flood relief to Hanoi. New Delhi also launched its Samudra Laksamana exercise in 2019 with Malaysia, wherein 2019 and 2022 exercises were held near Kota Kinabalu port.

The 2020 India-China military clashes at Galwan Valley resulted in several casualties on both sides, marking an extended border security crisis and breakdown of normal relations between the two nuclear powers. While India militarized its Himalayan borders, it also marked a new strategic posturing for itself farther from its Indian Ocean neighborhood, in the West Philippine Sea through its 2021 exercise with the Philippine Navy. This represented a greater bilateral engagement by an aspirational India that had previously participated in the quadrilateral "group sail" exercise in the South China Sea in 2019 with the navies from the US, Japan, and the Philippines, followed by the [at-sea replenishment](#) of INS Kiltan in the waters of the SCS. The increasing India-China tensions were also considered a driving factor for the inclusion of Australia in the Malabar exercises in 2022, wherein the Quad of the US, India, Japan, and Australia sailed together for the first time in the Philippine Sea. A year later, the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise was inaugurated in the South China Sea in May 2023, marking a significant step in India's multilateral maritime cooperation, commitment to ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, and marking advances in its SAGAR vision.

SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: impacts on India's South China Sea policy

Announcing the MAHASAGAR vision in March 2025, Indian PM Modi stated that it was "beyond SAGAR" and encompassed a broader Global South. This geographical expansion is a key differentiator from the 2015 SAGAR's focus on India's immediate maritime neighborhood, i.e., the Indian Ocean region. India's [MAHASAGAR vision](#) offers a strategic pathway to amplify its role in SCS security and engagement as a rising power through three interconnected avenues. Firstly, by cultivating robust maritime security cooperation with nations in the Western Indian Ocean and Africa, MAHASAGAR enhances India's reputation as a dependable security partner across the Indo-Pacific and establishes credibility that extends to increased diplomatic leverage and trust with Southeast Asia. Given the

region's concerns about Chinese assertiveness in the SCS, and India's demonstrated commitment as a reliable Indo-Pacific power, MAHASAGAR can help establish a greater partnership with India as a balancing strategic partner. Secondly, MAHASAGAR focuses on bolstering trade and connectivity with the Global South, something that India is yet to achieve through its economic linkages with ASEAN member states bordering the SCS. While India-ASEAN trade has increased since 2015 and was believed to touch [USD 300 billion](#) by 2025, New Delhi's trade deficit with ASEAN has widened, and the Free Trade Agreements with the ASEAN states have also provided an advantage to Chinese goods flooding the Indian market by rerouting their origin in ASEAN. However, India's presence in the region reaffirms its economic interdependence, especially during the ongoing US-China trade and tariff war, offering a mutually beneficial alternative to all SCS small states seeking to reduce their dependence on China as a single dominant economic power. Thirdly, MAHASAGAR's emphasis on capacity building in maritime domain awareness, hydrography, and sustainable ocean governance directly speaks to the need of SCS small states seeking self-reliance and enhancement of their domestic maritime capabilities to assert their sovereign rights in the SCS. Since 2022, India has intensified its defense cooperation with SCS stakeholder states, such as through the sale of BrahMos missiles to the Philippines (finalized in 2022, deliveries began in 2024), New Delhi's offer of seven helicopters to the Philippines for [search and rescue](#) operations during disasters, and the gifting of a naval corvette to Vietnam (in 2023). India, with its domestic defense and disaster relief capabilities' enhancement, though limited in comparison to those of the US and China, can continue to provide such assistance and truly position itself as a proactive stakeholder in maintaining rules-based order in the SCS.

Way ahead for India's MAHASAGAR vision in SCS engagement

SAGAR has served as India's operational maritime dimension since 2015 within the overarching Indo-Pacific strategic framework, translating New Delhi's principles of inclusivity, prosperity, and rule-based order into tangible engagement in the Indian Ocean domain. The evolution of SAGAR into MAHASAGAR vision in 2025 further underscores India's ambition to amplify its influence within the Global South, including the SCS through enhanced trade, security partnerships, and sustainable development initiatives, building upon the

foundational principles of its predecessor. The vision's emphasis on holistic security, the upholding of a rules-based order grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), enhanced capacity building for partner nations, and the fostering of robust strategic partnerships with like-minded ASEAN states provides a strong normative and operational framework for India to proactively contribute to regional stability and freedom of navigation in the contested waters. Through intensified maritime cooperation, defense engagements, and consistent advocacy for international law, MAHASAGAR positions India as a credible and increasingly influential actor in the South China Sea security landscape.

However, several limitations persist, such as the constraints of India's resource allocation relative to China's expansive capabilities, and India's necessity to carefully balance its volatile relations with China and evolving security cooperation with ASEAN. The lack of substantial and consistent progress in ASEAN-India economic relations further highlights the inherent challenges in translating MAHASAGAR's aspirational visions into concrete, impactful actions on the ground amidst complex geopolitical dynamics. Despite these limitations, MAHASAGAR offers strategic impetus for India to deepen its engagement, strengthen its partnerships, and more effectively project its influence in safeguarding mutual economic and security interests with states in the SCS and the broader Global South.