

Indian Mahasagar and the Evolution of India's Maritime Diplomacy

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Abstract

India's maritime diplomacy has undergone a decisive transformation over the past decade, evolving from a continental-focused posture toward a proactive, maritime-centric vision for the Indo-Pacific. This article examines that evolution and assesses the operational relevance of minilateral architectures in advancing India's strategic objectives. Using a qualitative, desk-based synthesis of recent scholarship, it traces the shift from the “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR) initiative to the more expansive “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” (MAHASAGAR) framework, and evaluates the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and emerging groupings such as the “Squad.” The analysis finds that India combines strategic autonomy with pragmatic multi-alignment, leveraging minilateral coalitions, the Blue Economy, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) as inclusive alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It also finds that persistent internal constraints—naval modernization delays, budgetary limitations, a residual continental mindset, and institutional and technological gaps—temper India's emergence as a maritime hegemon. The article concludes that the operational credibility of the MAHASAGAR vision depends on India's capacity to reconcile strategic autonomy with the practical requirements of collaborative security.

Keywords: maritime diplomacy; MAHASAGAR; SAGAR; Indo-Pacific; minilateralism; Quad; Blue Economy; Belt and Road Initiative; strategic autonomy

1. Introduction

India's geographic position, with a 7,500-kilometer coastline and proximity to vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), underscores its inherent maritime character (Levaillant, 2019). Historically, however, India's strategic focus was dominated by continental threats from its neighbours, leading to a period widely described as “sea blindness” (Kaura, 2018). This orientation began to shift in the early twenty-first century as India's economic growth necessitated a secure maritime environment for trade, with approximately 95% of its trade by volume and 68% by value moving through the oceans (Das, 2019; India's Role in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security, 2025). The Indian Ocean carries a substantial share of global energy shipments and container traffic, and the security of these flows is inseparable from India's economic resilience.

The transformation was neither sudden nor linear. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, in which the Indian Navy mounted one of its largest humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, exposed both the region's vulnerability and India's latent maritime capacity (Padmaja, 2015). The subsequent “Look East” and later “Act East” policies, the deepening of naval cooperation with the United States, Japan, and France, and the gradual reorientation of strategic attention toward the sea all contributed to a

redefinition of India's maritime identity (Naha, 2021; Roy-Chaudhury & de Estrada, 2018). Over time, this reorientation acquired a doctrinal vocabulary of its own, expressed through successive Indian Navy strategy documents and through the diplomatic language of the Indo-Pacific.

The contemporary era marks India's transition into a proactive maritime actor, driven by the emergence of a multipolar Indo-Pacific order and the rapid rise of China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Pandey & Mahapatra, 2024; Sakshi, 2025; Shuja & Sheikh, 2025). India's maritime diplomacy now seeks to preserve a free, open, and rules-based regional architecture, utilizing a combination of bilateral partnerships and minilateral coalitions to enhance its strategic influence without entering into formal alliances (Farooqui & Jafri, 2025; Schöttli, 2019). The result is a posture that is simultaneously cooperative and autonomous—willing to coordinate closely with like-minded partners while resisting the rigidities of bloc politics.

This article examines that transformation and assesses the operational relevance of minilateral architectures in advancing India's maritime objectives. It is guided by three questions. First, how has India's maritime vision evolved from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, and what does that evolution reveal about India's regional ambitions? Second, to what extent do minilateral groupings such as the Quad and the “Squad” translate strategic intent into operational capability? Third, what internal constraints limit India's emergence as a net security provider, and how do they condition the credibility of the MAHASAGAR vision?

The article is organised according to the IMRaD structure. Section 2 (Methods) sets out the research design, the evidence base, and the conceptual framework, clarifying minilateralism, soft balancing, and the “net security provider” concept. Section 3 (Results) presents the synthesised findings in four clusters: the evolution of India's maritime vision from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR; the Indo-Pacific context and India's strategic identity; minilateral architectures and their operational relevance; and the comparative contest with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Section 4 (Discussion) interprets these findings, examines the internal constraints and the limitations of the evidence, and draws out strategic implications and recommendations. Section 5 concludes.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design. It is a narrative (thematic) synthesis of recent scholarship and policy analysis on India's maritime diplomacy, rather than an empirical study that generates new primary data. The aim is to interpret and integrate existing findings in order to assess the operational relevance of minilateral architectures in the Indo-Pacific, and to situate that assessment within the broader evolution of India's maritime strategy.

The evidence base consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and think-tank analyses, drawn predominantly from the period 2015–2025, which corresponds to the arc from the launch of SAGAR to the articulation of MAHASAGAR. Sources were identified through targeted searches of scholarly databases and through reference-chaining, and were selected for their direct relevance to India's maritime strategy, the Indo-Pacific, and minilateral cooperation. The full set of sources consulted is listed in the references.

The analytical framework rests on three concepts. Minilateralism refers to cooperation among a small, purpose-built group of states, typically three to six, convened around a specific functional problem rather than a broad ideological programme (Hanada, 2025; Lee-Brown, 2018). It is distinguished from multilateralism, which aspires to universality and institutional permanence, and from bilateralism, which

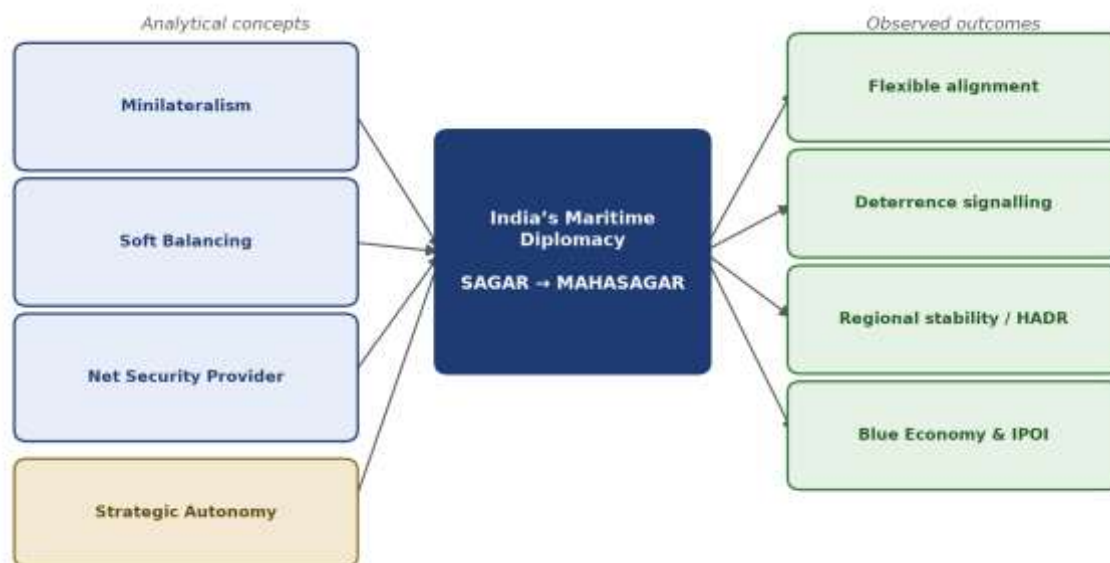
is confined to two parties. Because minilaterals are flexible, they can be assembled and reconfigured as threats and opportunities change, and they impose fewer sovereignty costs on their members. For India, this flexibility is particularly attractive: it permits meaningful security cooperation without the formal commitments that an alliance would entail.

A second conceptual anchor is soft balancing, which describes the use of non-military instruments—institutional coordination, diplomatic signalling, and limited security cooperation—to constrain a rising power without provoking direct confrontation (Hall, 2025). India's engagement with the Quad and its associated activities can be read in these terms: the objective is not to contain China militarily but to raise the costs of unilateral behaviour and to preserve a favourable balance of influence in the maritime domain (Tantray, 2025). This approach is consistent with India's preference for strategic autonomy, which prioritises freedom of decision over alignment with any single pole (Kosar, 2025).

A third concept is that of the “net security provider.” Coined in the strategic discourse surrounding the Indian Ocean, the term denotes a state that contributes disproportionately to regional security—through patrolling, surveillance, HADR, and capacity-building for smaller littoral states—without claiming a formal security guarantee over them (Upadhyaya, 2018). India has increasingly adopted this identity as a way of differentiating its maritime role from China's more transactional presence. The net-security-provider framing allows India to present its growing naval reach as a public good rather than a bid for hegemony.

These three concepts—minilateralism, soft balancing, and net security provision—provide the analytical lens for the analysis that follows (see Figure 1). Together they explain why India pursues cooperation that is deep but non-binding, why it balances China through institutions rather than arms races, and why it presents its maritime expansion as a contribution to regional order. They also help to explain the limits of India's approach: flexibility can shade into ambiguity, and a posture that avoids hard commitments may struggle to generate the deterrence that a more formal alliance would provide.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework: From Analytical Concepts to Observed Outcomes



Sources: Hanada, 2025; Lee-Brown, 2018; Upadhyaya, 2018

Analytically, the retrieved material was grouped into four thematic clusters: (a) the doctrinal evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR; (b) the Indo-Pacific context and India's strategic identity; (c) minilateral architectures and their operational relevance; and (d) the comparative contest with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Findings within each cluster were then synthesised and interpreted against the conceptual framework.

The method has clear limitations. It relies on secondary sources rather than primary fieldwork or quantitative indicators of maritime capability, and much of the literature is recent, fast-moving, and occasionally overlapping. Some source entries were incomplete or difficult to verify, and claims about operational effectiveness often rest on declarations of intent rather than independently measured outcomes. The results should therefore be read as a synthesis of current scholarship rather than a definitive assessment of India's maritime performance.

3. Results

The synthesis yielded four clusters of findings, which are presented in turn below. Each cluster addresses one dimension of India's maritime diplomacy and its minilateral turn.

3.1 Evolution of India's Maritime Vision: From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR

India's maritime vision is anchored in several key policy frameworks that emphasise inclusivity, stability, and cooperative security. The most consequential of these are the SAGAR doctrine, its successor MAHASAGAR, and the IPOI, each of which layers new objectives onto an evolving maritime strategy. Figure 2 situates these frameworks within the wider chronology of India's maritime diplomacy.

Figure 2
Timeline of India's Maritime Diplomacy, 2004–2024



Sources: Padmaja, 2015; Pradhan & Sahu, 2024; Yang, 2022

3.1.1 The SAGAR Doctrine

Introduced by Prime Minister Modi in 2015, the “Security and Growth for All in the Region” (SAGAR) initiative redefined India's approach to the IOR (Padmaja, 2015; Sana & Akhtar, 2020). SAGAR emphasised that maritime security is the primary responsibility of littoral states and promoted cooperation, collaboration, and the development of the Blue Economy (Padmaja, 2015). It positioned India as a first responder for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), reinforcing its role as a “net security provider” (Kumar, 2025). The doctrine was deliberately inclusive in tone, extending the promise of security and growth to smaller Indian Ocean states such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, and presenting India as a partner rather than a patron.

SAGAR rested on a set of practical commitments: deepening maritime domain awareness, strengthening the capacity of neighbouring coast guards and navies, expanding connectivity, and promoting sustainable use of ocean resources. Its logic was that India's own security was inseparable from the stability of its maritime neighbourhood, and that development and security were mutually reinforcing rather than competing goals (Padmaja, 2015). In this sense SAGAR marked a shift from a defensive, territory-focused maritime posture to one that combined protection of the sea with active shaping of the regional environment.

3.1.2 Transition to MAHASAGAR

The evolution from SAGAR to “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” (MAHASAGAR) reflects a broader and more integrated regional strategy (Mughal, 2025). MAHASAGAR expands on the cooperative principles of SAGAR, incorporating a wider geographical scope and a deeper focus on holistic advancement across security and developmental sectors (Mangu, 2025; Mughal, 2025). Whereas SAGAR was framed principally around the Indian Ocean, MAHASAGAR reaches further—into the western Pacific, the western Indian Ocean, and the maritime approaches to Africa—reflecting India's ambition to operate across the full breadth of the Indo-Pacific.

The transition also reflects a change in emphasis. MAHASAGAR places greater weight on mutuality, suggesting a relationship of equals rather than a provider–recipient dynamic, and on holistic advancement, which integrates security with development, technology, and sustainability. This framing responds to criticism that earlier initiatives could appear paternalistic and positions India as a co-architect of regional order rather than a mere supplier of security services (Mughal, 2025).

3.1.3 The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the Blue Economy

The transition aligns with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), proposed in 2019, which focuses on seven priority sectors, including maritime security, ecology, and resource sustainability (Chacko, 2012; Rai, 2022; Yang, 2022). The IPOI functions as a cooperative platform rather than a treaty: it invites partners to lead particular pillars while India provides convening capacity and strategic direction. This design reflects the minilateral logic discussed earlier—flexible, function-specific, and open to a range of participants (Yang, 2022).

Closely linked to the IPOI is the Blue Economy, which India has promoted as a framework for reconciling economic growth with marine sustainability. The Blue Economy encompasses fisheries, aquaculture, shipping, offshore energy, and marine biotechnology, and it emphasises the responsible stewardship of ocean resources. By foregrounding the Blue Economy, India offers a vision of maritime development that contrasts with extractive or debt-financed models and that resonates with smaller coastal states seeking growth without loss of sovereignty (Javed, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

3.1.4 India's Naval Doctrine and Maritime Strategy Documents

The policy frameworks articulated at the political level are mirrored in the doctrinal documents produced by the Indian Navy. Successive strategy statements have moved from a defensive, sea-denial orientation toward a more expansive maritime strategy emphasising power projection, constabulary functions, and cooperative engagement (Limaye, 2017; Upadhyaya, 2018). These documents place growing emphasis on the Indian Navy's role as a diplomatic instrument—what is often termed “maritime diplomacy”—through port visits, joint exercises, and capacity-building with smaller littoral states (Limaye, 2017).

The doctrinal shift matters because it translates political vision into operational guidance. A strategy that prioritises cooperative engagement requires different capabilities from one that prioritises territorial defence: it demands sustained reach, logistics, and interoperability with partners. The extent to which India's doctrine has been matched by investment is, however, uneven, and the gap between doctrine and capability remains a recurring theme in assessments of India's maritime posture (Upadhyaya, 2018).

India's maritime strategy also increasingly acknowledges the interdependence of security and development. By framing the navy's role as encompassing constabulary tasks—counter-piracy, counter-smuggling, and disaster response—alongside traditional war-fighting, the doctrine aligns with the developmental emphasis of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR and reinforces India's identity as a net security provider (Limaye, 2017; Upadhyaya, 2018).

3.2 The Indo-Pacific Context and Strategic Identity

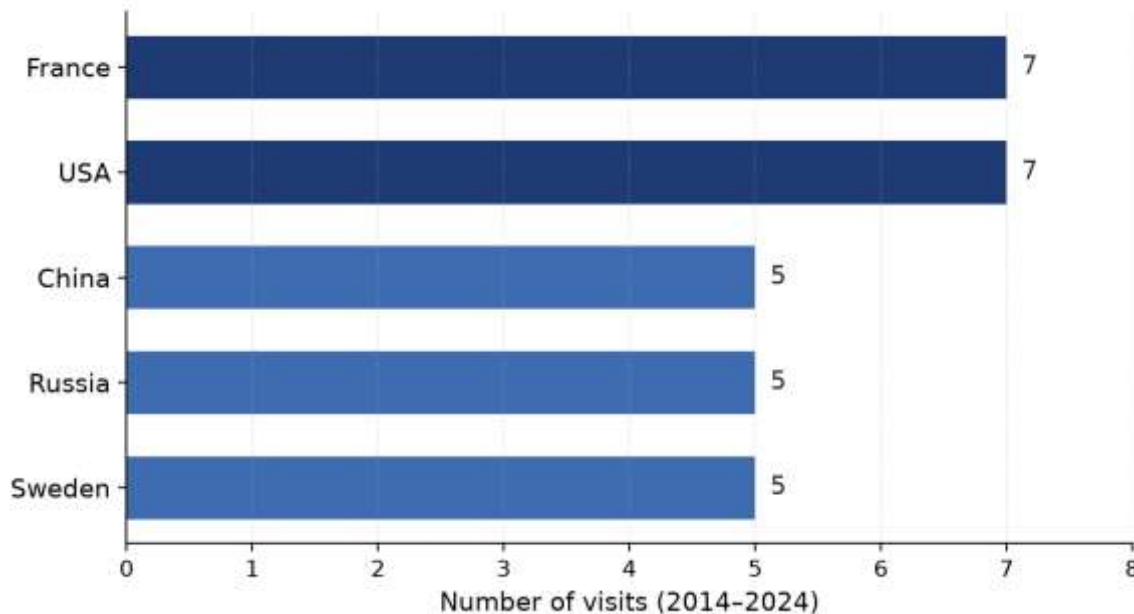
The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a single geo-strategic unit, reflecting the interconnected nature of the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Mehmood & Khan, 2023; Roy-Chaudhury & de Estrada, 2018). India's embrace of this construct is a pragmatic response to shifting global power dynamics and to China's “String of Pearls” strategy, which is seen as encircling India through a chain of port and infrastructure investments (Kumar, 2024; Schöttli, 2019; Sisodia & Seth, 2025). The Indo-Pacific framing allows India to connect its traditional Indian Ocean interests with the broader dynamics of East Asian security, and to present itself as a bridge between the two.

3.2.1 Strategic Autonomy and Multi-Alignment

India's strategic identity has evolved from traditional non-alignment to a policy of “strategic autonomy” combined with “multi-alignment” (Kaur et al., 2023; Kosar, 2025). This hybrid stance allows India to engage deeply with the United States and other Western powers in security-based partnerships while maintaining independence and engaging in diverse institutional frameworks such as BRICS and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) (Kaur et al., 2023; Kosar, 2025; Tantray, 2025). This approach challenges the prevailing US–China dichotomy and redefines India as a co-architect of an inclusive regional order rather than a junior partner in a bipolar contest (Pradhan & Sahu, 2024; Sharma, 2024; Tantray, 2025).

Multi-alignment is not simply the pursuit of balance for its own sake; it is a strategy for maximising optionality in a fluid environment. By sustaining relationships across competing poles, India preserves leverage, hedges against the possibility of abandonment, and retains the capacity to shape rules and norms rather than merely respond to them. The cost of this approach is that it can appear inconsistent, and partners may question the depth of India's commitments when interests diverge (Kosar, 2025). India's abstentions in United Nations votes on the Russo-Ukrainian war, and its refusal to publicly back either side, illustrate this balancing posture in practice (Pradhan, 2022). Figure 3 captures the breadth of this diplomatic outreach.

Figure 3
Countries Most Frequently Visited by Prime Minister Modi, 2014–2024



Sources: Pradhan and Sahu (2024).

3.2.2 Maritime Security Challenges

India faces a range of traditional and non-traditional threats in the Indo-Pacific. Traditional challenges include China's increasing naval presence, base developments (e.g., Djibouti, Gwadar), and territorial assertions in the South China Sea (Dellios, 2003; Kumar, 2025; Schöttli, 2019). Non-traditional threats include piracy, maritime terrorism (e.g., the 2008 Mumbai attacks), narco-trafficking, and environmental degradation (India's Strive to Be an Indomitable Power, 2023; Kumar, 2025; Mishra & Pandey, 2023). Securing SLOCs carrying critical energy reserves remains a top priority, and the convergence of traditional and non-traditional risks complicates the design of an effective maritime strategy (Das, 2019; India's Role in Indo-Pacific Maritime Security, 2025).

The salience of these threats has grown as the Indian Ocean has become a theatre of great-power competition. China's growing naval deployments, its investments in port infrastructure across the region, and its expanding presence in the western Indian Ocean have all intensified India's sense of strategic exposure. At the same time, persistent challenges such as piracy off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden, smuggling networks, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing demonstrate that security in the maritime domain cannot be reduced to state-to-state rivalry alone.

3.2.3 Non-Traditional Security and Humanitarian Assistance

Non-traditional threats occupy a growing share of India's maritime agenda. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast, maritime terrorism, trafficking in narcotics and arms, and illegal fishing all impose costs on regional states and complicate the task of securing sea lanes (India's Strive to Be an Indomitable Power, 2023; Shuja & Sheikh, 2025). India has responded by participating in multinational counter-piracy patrols, by escorting vessels through high-risk waters, and by strengthening coast-guard cooperation with neighbouring states.

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has become a signature element of India's maritime diplomacy. The Indian Navy's response to the 2004 tsunami, and its subsequent relief operations in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mozambique, demonstrated a capacity to project assistance rapidly across the region

(Padmaja, 2015). These operations are valued not only for their humanitarian impact but for their strategic signalling: they present India as a reliable first responder and a partner of choice, distinguishing its regional role from that of a distant power (Kumar, 2025; Pradhan & Sahu, 2024).

The convergence of traditional and non-traditional threats reinforces the logic of minilateralism. Because no single state can address piracy, trafficking, and disaster response alone, issue-specific groupings become attractive vehicles for cooperation. At the same time, the breadth of these challenges underscores the importance of the inclusive forums—IORA and IONS—that bring together the full range of littoral states (Shuja & Sheikh, 2025; Yang, 2022).

3.3 Minilateral Architectures and Operational Relevance

Minilateralism has become a cornerstone of India's maritime diplomacy, providing a flexible and effective means to address regional challenges without the constraints of formal military alliances (Kumar, 2024; Lee-Brown, 2018; Sangwan & Sangwan, 2025). For India, the appeal of minilateralism lies in its adaptability: groupings can be tailored to specific problems, they avoid the sovereignty costs of alliances, and they allow India to cooperate with partners whose broader strategic orientations it does not fully share.

3.3.1 The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)

The Quad (India, USA, Japan, Australia) is the most prominent minilateral framework in the Indo-Pacific (Hanada, 2025; Naha, 2021). It serves as a crucial tool for deterrence, aiming to maintain a free and open region (Khalid, 2021). The Quad's agenda has broadened beyond maritime security to include critical and emerging technologies, resilient supply chains, infrastructure, and pandemic response, reflecting an effort to make the grouping durable by giving it a positive, functional mandate.

Operationally, the Quad manifests through joint naval exercises such as Malabar, which has evolved from a bilateral India–US exercise to a multilateral event involving all four members (Evolution of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, 2023; Khalid, 2021; Kumar, 2024). These exercises focus on maritime interdiction, anti-submarine warfare, and enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA) (Evolution of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, 2023; Schöttli, 2019). The Malabar series has become a visible signal of interoperability and shared intent, and its expansion is often cited as evidence that the Quad has moved from a dialogue to a practical maritime coalition.

Yet the Quad remains deliberately non-alliance in character. It has no mutual defence clause, no standing secretariat, and no binding commitments, which limits its deterrent value even as it enhances coordination. The challenge for India is to extract operational benefits from the Quad—interoperability, information-sharing, and MDA—while preserving the strategic autonomy that participation in a more formalised bloc would erode (Hanada, 2025; Naha, 2021).

3.3.2 The Squad and Overlapping Groupings

India also engages with newer, overlapping minilaterals such as the “Squad” (USA, Japan, Australia, Philippines), which focuses more on hard security challenges in the South China Sea (Khan & Khan, 2025). While India is not a formal member of all these groupings, it engages through defence cooperation and trilateral security dialogues (e.g., India–Japan–Australia, France–India–Australia) to supplement traditional alliances and address institutional deficiencies (Khan & Khan, 2025; Lee-Brown, 2018; Schöttli, 2019).

The proliferation of overlapping groupings—the Quad, the Squad, AUKUS, the trilateral dialogues, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)—creates a dense web of cooperation in which India can participate selectively. This web functions as a form of “variable geometry,” in which different

combinations of states assemble around different issues. For India, this geometry offers flexibility but also raises the risk of being drawn into commitments it did not fully anticipate, and it complicates the task of maintaining a coherent strategic narrative (Sangwan & Sangwan, 2025).

3.3.3 IORA and IONS

Regional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) remain vital for India's multilateral engagement (Banerjee, 2020; Farooqui & Jafri, 2025; Yang, 2022). IORA facilitates regional cooperation in disaster relief and economic growth, while IONS provides a platform for naval chiefs to discuss maritime security issues (Chacko, 2012; Yang, 2022). India's leadership in these forums reinforces its role as a regional stabiliser and gives it a venue in which to shape norms in the absence of binding rules (Banerjee, 2020; Yadav, 2023).

IORA and IONS complement the minilateral groupings by providing inclusivity and legitimacy. Whereas the Quad and the Squad are exclusive by design, IORA and IONS are open to a broad range of littoral states, including those wary of great-power competition. India's ability to operate across both exclusive and inclusive formats is central to its claim to be a net security provider rather than a partisan in the region's rivalries (Yadav, 2023).

3.3.4 The Limits and Risks of Minilateralism

Minilateralism is not without costs. Because minilateral groupings are voluntary and non-binding, they can be slow to act and difficult to sustain when the interests of their members diverge (Hanada, 2025). The Quad, for instance, has struggled to move beyond coordination to concrete collective action, in part because its members differ on how far they are willing to confront China. For India, this ambiguity is a feature as much as a bug: it preserves autonomy, but it also limits the deterrent signal that the grouping can send (Hanada, 2025; Naha, 2021).

There is also a risk of overextension. Participation in numerous overlapping groupings—the Quad, the Squad, the trilateral dialogues, and the IPEF—can stretch India's diplomatic and military resources and dilute its strategic focus (Sangwan & Sangwan, 2025). Managing this proliferation requires a clear sense of priorities and a disciplined approach to commitments, lest India find itself enmeshed in arrangements whose cumulative demands exceed its capacity.

Finally, minilateralism can generate unintended signalling effects. Cooperation among exclusive groupings may be read by China as containment, inviting counter-measures that raise regional tension. India's challenge is to capture the operational benefits of minilateral cooperation while managing its strategic consequences, a balancing act that lies at the heart of its maritime diplomacy (Khan & Khan, 2025; Tantray, 2025).

3.4 Comparative Analysis: India's Maritime Diplomacy vs. China's BRI

India's maritime strategy is often framed as a counter-balance to China's expanding influence in the region. The comparison is instructive because it highlights contrasting models of regional engagement—one grounded in connectivity and debt-financed infrastructure, the other in sustainability, capacity-building, and adherence to international law.

3.4.1 The Blue Economy vs. Belt and Road Initiative

India leverages the Blue Economy and the IPOI as an inclusive and sustainable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Javed, 2025). Unlike the BRI, which is often criticised for “debt-trap” diplomacy, India's model emphasises environmental sustainability, local capacity building, and adherence to international laws such as UNCLOS (Javed, 2025; Limaye, 2017; Padmaja, 2015). Initiatives such as

“Project Mausam” utilise cultural and historical links to littoral states to counterbalance China's connectivity-based power projection (Padmaja, 2015; Panda, 2020; Pradhan & Sahu, 2024; Ullah, 2019). The contrast is partly normative and partly material. Normatively, India presents its approach as rules-based, transparent, and respectful of sovereignty, in contrast to a BRI often portrayed as opaque and asymmetric. Materially, however, India's capacity to fund large-scale infrastructure is far smaller than China's, which limits the reach of its alternative. India's strategy therefore relies on comparative advantage in soft power, maritime services, and security cooperation rather than on matching Chinese investment volume (Javed, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

3.4.2 Infrastructure and Power Projection

India has intensified its infrastructure development to enhance its maritime posture. The development of facilities on Agalega Island (Mauritius) and Assumption Island (Seychelles) marks a shift toward strategic assertiveness and enhanced surveillance capabilities in the western Indian Ocean (Mangu, 2025; Roy-Chaudhury & de Estrada, 2018). These outposts support mission-based deployments and the monitoring of rival naval activities, extending India's reach well beyond its immediate neighbourhood (Pandey & Singh, 2023; Roy-Chaudhury & de Estrada, 2018).

These investments represent a subtle but significant change in India's maritime posture. Historically reluctant to establish overseas facilities, India has begun to accept the logic of forward presence, recognising that surveillance and rapid response require physical infrastructure. At the same time, India has been careful to frame these facilities as cooperative arrangements with host states rather than as bases, in keeping with its preference for partnership over hierarchy (Mangu, 2025).

3.4.3 Normative Contestation and International Law

A further dimension of the comparison concerns norms. India's emphasis on UNCLOS, freedom of navigation, and the peaceful settlement of disputes positions it as a defender of the rules-based order in the maritime domain (Schöttli, 2019; Sisodia & Seth, 2025). China's expansive maritime claims and its island-building activities in the South China Sea have become a focal point of regional anxiety, and India's adherence to legal norms offers a contrast that resonates with smaller states. This normative positioning is a source of India's soft power and a rationale for its minilateral partnerships (Kumar, 2024; Mishra & Pandey, 2023). Table 1 summarises the principal contrasts between the two models.

Table 1
India's Blue Economy/IPOI Model versus China's Belt and Road Initiative

Dimension	India's Blue Economy / IPOI	China's BRI
Primary logic	Sustainable, inclusive development	Connectivity and infrastructure finance
Normative basis	UNCLOS and the rules-based order	Bilateral deals; contested legal claims
Financing model	Capacity-building and partnership	Large-scale, debt-financed loans
Perceived risk	Limited (sustainability focus)	“Debt-trap” diplomacy; sovereignty erosion
Security emphasis	Net security provider; HADR	Strategic access and port control

Dimension	India's Blue Economy / IPOI	China's BRI
Signature initiative	Project Mausam; IPOI pillars	Maritime Silk Road

Sources: Javed (2025), Limaye (2017), Padmaja (2015), and Pradhan and Sahu (2024).

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation and Synthesis

Read together, the findings suggest that India's maritime diplomacy is best characterised as flexible alignment rather than alliance-building. The doctrinal evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR widens both the geography and the agenda of India's maritime engagement, while the minilateral turn supplies instruments flexible enough to accommodate India's aversion to binding commitments. The Blue Economy and the IPOI offer a normative alternative to the BRI, and the growing emphasis on forward presence in the western Indian Ocean signals a willingness to accept the costs of a more assertive posture (Mangu, 2025; Padmaja, 2015; Yang, 2022). At the same time, the findings expose a persistent gap between strategic ambition and material capability, and it is this gap that conditions the credibility of the entire maritime vision (Hufnagel, 2020; Mughal, 2025). The shift from non-alignment to multi-alignment has itself drawn criticism for leaving India's position ambiguous in an increasingly polarised world order, and that ambiguity extends to the maritime domain (Pradhan & Sahu, 2024).

4.2 Limitations of the Evidence and Internal Constraints

Despite its ambitions, India's rise as a maritime power is tempered by several significant constraints. These include the material limitations of naval modernization and budgets, the persistence of a continental mindset, and institutional and technological gaps. Each of these conditions the operational credibility of the MAHASAGAR vision.

4.2.1 Naval Modernization and Budgetary Issues

India's warship-building programmes continue to suffer from delays, cost overruns, and technological gaps (Chacko, 2012; Hufnagel, 2020). The navy remains overstretched, with a declining conventional submarine force and a lack of adequate multi-role helicopters and minesweepers (Hufnagel, 2020). While there is a goal to develop a 212-ship navy, domestic construction capacity and funding remain critical bottlenecks (Hufnagel, 2020; Upadhyaya, 2018). The gap between strategic ambition and material capability is perhaps the single most important constraint on India's maritime role.

Budgetary allocation compounds the problem. The Indian Navy has historically received a smaller share of the defence budget than the army, and although this balance is beginning to shift, the navy's share remains insufficient to fund the fleet expansion required by its stated objectives. Modernization is further complicated by dependence on foreign suppliers for critical technologies, which introduces delays and vulnerabilities that domestic programmes have not yet overcome (Upadhyaya, 2018).

4.2.2 Continental Obsession

A persistent "continental mindset" among strategic planners often prioritises land-based threats from Pakistan and China over maritime security (Das, 2019; Levallant, 2019). This has historically led to a lower share of the defence budget for the navy compared to the army, although this balance is beginning to shift (Kaura, 2018). The continental orientation is deeply institutionalised, reflecting the legacy of partition, the prominence of land warfare in India's strategic culture, and the bureaucratic weight of the army in defence planning.

Changing this orientation requires more than budgetary adjustment; it requires a shift in strategic culture. The persistence of sea blindness, even as India's economic dependence on the sea has deepened, suggests that maritime awareness has not yet been fully internalised across the strategic establishment. Until it is, the maritime vision articulated in SAGAR and MAHASAGAR may outpace the institutional capacity to implement it (Kaura, 2018; Levaillant, 2019).

4.2.3 Institutional and Technological Gaps

The shipbuilding industry in India currently accounts for only about 1% of the global market, hindered by archaic infrastructure and a lack of strategic vision in research and development (Xavier, 2013). Effective maritime domain awareness (MDA) requires deeper inter-agency coordination and technological investment to overcome current data gaps (Wulandari, 2024; Yousafzai, 2024). The integration of sensors, satellites, and information-sharing networks remains incomplete, limiting India's ability to monitor vast oceanic spaces in real time.

Institutional fragmentation poses a parallel challenge. Responsibility for maritime affairs is distributed across the navy, the coast guard, customs, fisheries, and various civilian agencies, and coordination among them is often imperfect. Closing these gaps will require sustained investment and organisational reform, without which India's capacity to act as a net security provider will remain constrained (Wulandari, 2024; Xavier, 2013).

4.2.4 Limitations of the Evidence Base

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the evidence on which this analysis rests. Much of the recent literature is drawn from fast-moving, sometimes overlapping publications, and some sources are incomplete or difficult to verify. Claims about operational effectiveness are often based on declarations of intent rather than on independently verified outcomes, and quantitative measures of maritime capability are scarce. The analysis in this article should therefore be read as a synthesis of current scholarship rather than as a definitive assessment of India's maritime performance.

4.3 Strategic Implications and Recommendations

Several implications follow from the analysis. First, India's maritime diplomacy is best understood as an exercise in flexible alignment rather than in alliance-building. The value of minilateral architectures lies less in their deterrent power than in their capacity to build interoperability, share information, and signal resolve without constraining India's freedom of action (Hanada, 2025; Lee-Brown, 2018). India should therefore continue to invest in these formats while resisting pressure to formalise them into a bloc.

Second, the credibility of the MAHASAGAR vision depends on material capability. Strategic narratives that outrun naval capacity risk becoming hollow, and India's partners will judge its commitment by what it deploys rather than by what it declares. Accelerating indigenous shipbuilding, closing the submarine and mine-countermeasures gaps, and expanding maritime domain awareness should be treated as prerequisites for the operational relevance of India's maritime diplomacy (Hufnagel, 2020; Upadhyaya, 2018).

Third, India should continue to position the Blue Economy and the IPOI as inclusive alternatives to the BRI. This approach plays to India's strengths—norms, services, and capacity-building—rather than to Chinese strengths in large-scale infrastructure finance. Deepening cooperation with smaller littoral states on fisheries management, disaster response, and maritime education would reinforce India's claim to be a net security provider and would build goodwill that translates into influence (Javed, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

Fourth, India should strengthen the institutional coherence of its maritime governance. Better coordination among the navy, the coast guard, and civilian agencies, and sustained investment in surveillance and information-sharing technology, would enhance India's ability to convert awareness into action. Institutional reform is unglamorous but indispensable to the realisation of the maritime vision articulated in SAGAR and MAHASAGAR (Wulandari, 2024; Xavier, 2013).

Finally, India should be candid about the limits of its approach. A posture that combines deep cooperation with limited commitment is flexible, but it can also be ambiguous, and ambiguity may weaken deterrence. Managing this tension—preserving autonomy while reassuring partners—is the central challenge of India's maritime diplomacy and the key to ensuring that the MAHASAGAR vision is operational rather than aspirational (Kosar, 2025; Tantray, 2025).

5. Conclusion

The evolution of India's maritime diplomacy from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR represents a decisive recalibration of its regional role. By leveraging minilateral architectures and strategic partnerships, India has positioned itself as a central actor in the Indo-Pacific, championing a rules-based and inclusive order. The transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR widens both the geography and the agenda of India's maritime engagement, embedding security within a broader framework of development, connectivity, and sustainability (Mughal, 2025; Padmaja, 2015).

However, the operational relevance of these visions depends on India's ability to overcome internal constraints, particularly in naval modernization and budgetary allocation. Delays in shipbuilding, a declining submarine force, a residual continental mindset, and institutional and technological gaps all temper India's emergence as a maritime hegemon (Hufnagel, 2020; Kaura, 2018; Xavier, 2013). Without sustained investment and institutional reform, the gap between strategic ambition and material capability is likely to persist.

To truly realise the MAHASAGAR vision, India must continue to balance its quest for strategic autonomy with the practical necessity of collaborative security, ensuring that the Indian Ocean remains a zone of stability and growth for all. Minilateralism offers a flexible instrument for doing so, but flexibility must be matched by capability and coherence. The measure of India's maritime diplomacy will not be the eloquence of its doctrines but the reliability of its presence, the depth of its partnerships, and its capacity to contribute to a stable and inclusive maritime order.

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