

## THE MAHASAGAR INITIATIVE IN THE CURRENT SECURITY CONTEXT

May 23rd, 2025

CRF organised a day-long conference titled, 'The MAHASAGAR Initiative in the Current Security Context.' Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi, President of the Chintan Research Foundation, delivered the welcome address at the Conference. Emphasizing the growing strategic importance of the maritime domain, he quoted, "Who controls the oceans controls the world." He also elaborated on the deeper significance of the acronym MAHASAGAR, highlighting that the letter 'G' stands for Growth and Sustainability, while 'R' represents Region and Shared Responsibility.

The keynote address was delivered by Admiral RK Dhowan PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd). He emphasised India's strategic maritime significance in the Indian Ocean and highlighted its critical role in global trade, energy security, and regional stability. He outlined the Indian Navy's responsibilities in safeguarding sea lines, addressing modern threats like piracy, terrorism, trafficking, and environmental challenges. The MAHASAGAR initiative, he explained, had evolved from the SAGAR vision and aimed to promote maritime cooperation, connectivity, and sustainable development across the Indo-Pacific. He offered a few suggestions with focus on regional cooperation, blue economy growth, and initiatives like "Swachh Sagar" for clean oceans. He stated that India can emerge as a resurgent maritime power in the 21st century and concluded by reinforcing the belief that the 21st century is indeed the "Century of the Seas."

"Who controls the oceans controls the world."





Across four engaging panels, the conference explored significant themes: the strategic evolution to MAHASAGAR, the current security dynamics of India, the mission to secure maritime frontiers against challenges, and the ways to strengthen India's economic and strategic partnerships under the MAHASAGAR framework. The conference catalysed the public discourse on India's maritime strategy and convened a distinguished gathering of scholars and practitioners from academia, government, and industry to engage in profound discussions on India's strategic evolution to MAHASAGAR.

Dr. Chavi Vasisht has stressed that India's maritime vision has transformed from Indian-Ocean focused SAGAR initiative to a broader MAHASAGAR initiative in which the voice of the global south is recognised. She highlighted the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean as a vital conduit for trade, energy, and regional connectivity, while also recognising the complex security challenges it presents. Dr. Vasisht argued that MAHASAGAR represents not just a geographical expansion, but a shift toward holistic, collaborative, and sustainable maritime governance. She highlighted that India needs to do a strategic alignment - bridging the gap between India's aspirations and its capabilities. In this evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia has offered two dimensions of interpretation - first, as a template for bilateral cooperation which is exemplified by

India - Mauritius bilateral relation (demonstrating that a large country like India and a smaller one like Mauritius can forge partnerships based on mutual respect, trust, and equality) and second, a geographic expansion that ranges from maritime neighbours like Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, to the whole of the Global South. Emphasising the ocean's central role in connectivity, trade, and security, Ms. Swati Ganeshan highlighted the increased need to introduce initiatives in sustainable shipping, offshore energy, and marine resource management that can address climate threats, biodiversity loss, and food security – especially for small island states.

Following that, the discussion focussed on the current security context, with particular concern over regional instability affecting India's national interests. Nitin A. Gokhale presented WH-questions to Pakistan's intentions in the recent attack on India in Pahalgam. He said, "India overcame the conventional hesitations by redefining redlines." He significantly highlighted that India must prioritize post-battle assessment and preparation. He mentioned that India is alone in war, peace, and narrative building so the nation should reevaluate its priorities by enhancing analysis of China's intentions, smart defence spending, emphasizing technology-driven and tech-enabled strategies, and recognizing the growing significance of space warfare. Building on the primary motives of Pakistan's attack on India, Dr. Shalini Chawla





has underscored the significant impact of false narratives in analyzing the conflict. She emphasized that India has effectively countered disinformation spread by external actors with evidence-based responses. However, she stressed the importance of continuing this effort by investing significant financial resources in social media strategies to combat misinformation and shape public perception proactively. Col. Vivek Chadha connected the recent Pahalgam attack to historical context by examining India's Operation Sindoor through the lens of Dharm Yuddh, or righteous war. He questioned whether moral principles can ensure success in a world driven by realism, contrasting the concept of Just War – Jus Ad Bellum (right to war) and Jus in Bello (conduct in war) – with the deeper civilizational foundation of Dharma Yuddha. For this, he mentioned that key enablers include maintaining a high moral ground, employing judicious force, leveraging the power of narrative, building capacity, practicing detached perseverance, and using force as a last resort. Rahul Bhonsle said, 'Terrorism is a tool for internal survival for certain states.' With this objective in the neighborhood, it becomes crucial for India to prepare for the punitive deterrence and leverage narrative power to counter these threats effectively. He also emphasised that China supports Pakistan through a strategy of 'Beg, Borrow, Steal' which will likely enhance Pakistan's capabilities. Thus, he underscored that

China is winning without fighting, employing Sun Tzu philosophy of achieving victory through non-combative means.

Following the understanding of the current security landscape, the conference also highlighted the importance of safeguarding maritime domains. Prof. Mohapatra has stressed the importance of diplomatic narrative management in contemporary conflict environments. He underlined the strategic challenge from Bangladesh and pointed to the vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor ('chicken neck'), cautioning that India must not forget hard-earned lessons in regional security. Jayant Misra said, "Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is a multi-agency responsibility involving the Navy, Coast Guard, customs, marine police, and others." Through initiatives like MDA, establishment of national information-sharing centres, enhanced training, and technology transfer, he has called for greater regional cooperation to address maritime threats. Prof. A. Subramanyam Raju emphasized the need to balance security, development, and sustainability. Further, the Professor stressed on India's increasing role in regional groupings like IORA, MILAN, and the Indian Ocean Commission along with its constructive participation in UNCLOS arbitration. Dr. Pragya Pandey, contextualised the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific as crucial global commons, where peace and prosperity depend on a stable maritime order. She stressed the need for cooperative governance amid threats like piracy,



illegal fishing, and transnational crimes, which endanger Small Island Developing States (SIDS). She also pointed out India's role in ensuring regional security and fostering sustainable maritime partnerships.

Along with security and connectivity, the conference emphasised India's economic and strategic partnerships under MAHASAGAR. Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva said, "one cannot build only narratives while ignoring concrete outcomes; nor can we have isolated projects without embedding them in a compelling narrative." He suggested that any port construction or development project under MAHASAGAR should be aligned with a clear, overarching vision and narrative to ensure strategic coherence and impact. To tap economic potential, Ambassador Preeti Saran suggested to build trust and deepen partnerships with smaller littoral states and key regional players like Mauritius, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and Egypt, and strategically invest in port infrastructure, shipbuilding, and blue economy initiatives in harnessing the economic benefits for India. Further, she emphasized the need for effective implementation through active public-private partnerships, clear regulations, and swift execution by involving key Indian private sector players like Adani Ports, GMR, ONGC Videsh, and Petronet to harness India's talent, strategic location, and global credibility for concrete maritime growth and leadership. Lastly, Ruchita Beri has highlighted that the blue economy is a core pillar for MAHASAGAR, citing India's initiatives like Sagarmala, the Deep Ocean Mission, and sustainable fisheries as key efforts toward sustainable ocean resource use. She emphasized the necessity of strong foundations before expanding ambitious projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and Africa connectivity – reminding all stakeholders that thorough preparation and coordinated action are essential to realizing the full potential of the MAHASAGAR vision.

At the day-long conference, speakers explored the MAHASAGAR initiative, covering its inception, progress, achievements, and future roadmap for India. The conference was put together by CRF's team led by Dr Cchavi Vasisht and Lakshmi Kusuma Kotha. Speakers and participants explored how targeted projects can transform the MAHASAGAR initiative from a visionary concept into a tangible and impactful reality. This transformation hinges on building an informed society and implementing well-defined, actionable projects.

The distinguished list of panellists included Amb. Rajiv Bhatia, Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House; Ms. Swati Ganeshan, Visiting Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation; Dr. Cchavi Vasisht, Associate Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation; Mr. SK Tripathi, former R&AW Chief; Mr. Nitin Gokhale, Founder, StratNews Global; Dr. Shalini Chawla, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies; Col. Vivek Chadha, Senior Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses; Brig. Rahul Bhonsle, Director, Security Risks Asia; Prof. Chintamani Mahapatra, Founder and Honorary Chairman, Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies; Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar, Distinguished Fellow, Council for Strategic and Defence Research; Mr. Jayant Mishra, Member, Executive Council, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses; Prof. A Subramanyam Raju, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry University; Dr. Pragya Pandey, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA); Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva, Centre for European Studies, JNU; Amb. Preeti Saran, Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs and Ms. Ruchita Beri, Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF). ●