



Chintan  
Research  
Foundation

EVENT REPORT

# THE MAHASAGAR INITIATIVE

In The Current Security Context

23 May 2025, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi



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EVENT REPORT

# **THE MAHASAGAR INITIATIVE IN THE CURRENT SECURITY CONTEXT**

23 May 2025, New Delhi



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## WELCOME ADDRESS



**Shri Shishir Priyadarshi**  
President, CRF

Welcoming the panellists and audience, Shri Shishir Priyadarshi reflected on the journey from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, describing it as a prominent initiative to deepen and strengthen India's maritime vision. He noted that MAHASAGAR builds upon the foundational principles of SAGAR, extending them into a more comprehensive framework that reflects India's expanded geographical and strategic ambitions. He emphasised that the 'G' in MAHASAGAR stands for sustained and holistic growth, underscoring that maritime development must be inclusive and forward-looking. The 'R' stands for the region, reminding us of the shared responsibility across the Indian Ocean and the Global South.

He stressed that this framework underscores the need for cohesive integration of India's maritime governance, connectivity initiatives, and regional partnerships into a unified strategic outlook. He envisioned India not merely as a participant but as a central architect of the emerging maritime order, one that prioritises collaborative development, supply chain resilience, and equitable access to the benefits of global trade. He observed that the seas and oceans bind countries and economies together, and that India's maritime strength in the 21st century must be built upon the central role of maritime routes in trans-global trade, connectivity, and sustainable growth. In this context, he positioned MAHASAGAR as a strategic umbrella under which India's engagement with West Asia, Africa, Europe, and the broader Indo-Pacific can be coherently advanced.

He further reflected that connectivity corridors serve as the mechanisms through which aspirations of global trade can be realised. He concluded by calling for bridging maritime aspirations with institutional capabilities, ensuring that India's existing national and regional frameworks are cohesively integrated to support the vision of becoming a developed and globally connected nation by 2047.

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS



**Admiral RK Dhowan**  
PVSM, AVSM, YSM  
(Retd)

Admiral Dhowan drew attention to the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, where India enjoys a geographically advantageous position. Accounting for 66% of global oil transportation, half of containerized trade, and one-third of global cargo movement, the region is indispensable to the world economy. Consequently, any disruption to maritime activity in these waters could trigger widespread economic repercussions.. He noted that over 120,000 ships transit these waters annually, carrying 66 per cent of the world's oil, 50 per cent of the world's container traffic, and a third of global cargo. He stressed that any disruption here would ripple far beyond the region, threatening the global economy itself.

With over 120 warships from more than 20 navies operating in these waters, he affirmed that India has consistently championed international law and freedom of navigation. He cited Operation Sindoor as a decisive demonstration of this readiness, as carrier battle groups, submarines, and aircraft were swiftly deployed in the northern Arabian Sea, showcasing coordinated, precise, multi-domain joint operations. He asserted that India is prepared not merely for a two-front war but for a three-front conflict, including the defence of its vast maritime frontiers. He drew attention to wide-ranging threats: arms trafficking, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and illegal fishing, all of which undermine regional stability. He emphasised that future conflicts will be multi-domain – fought across land, sea, air, cyber, and space simultaneously.

He recommended a comprehensive maritime cooperation roadmap through a whole-of-nation approach. He stressed that structures such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and the Malabar exercises must be strengthened and interconnected. He pointed to the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and white shipping agreements as important steps, while adding that underwater domain awareness must now be integrated into this architecture.

On sustainable development, he urged extending the Prime Minister's Swachh Bharat vision to Swachh Sagar – ensuring clean oceans for future generations. He highlighted the Sagarmala project, inland waterway development, and a proposed National Shipbuilding Plan as anchors of India's blue economy. With over 60 warships under construction in Indian shipyards, he noted the Navy's transformation from a buyer's navy into a builder's navy under Atmanirbhar Bharat. He affirmed that the 21st century is the Century of the Seas and that India must lead from the front.

## SESSION 1 | THE STRATEGIC EVOLUTION TO MAHASAGAR

### MODERATOR



**SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI**  
President,  
Chintan Research Foundation

### PANELISTS



**DR CCHAVI VASISHT**  
Associate Fellow,  
Chintan Research Foundation



**AMB RAJIV BHATIA**  
Former Ambassador & Distinguished  
Fellow, Gateway House



**SWATI GANESHAN**  
Visiting Fellow,  
Chintan Research Foundation

The session focused on the strategic rationale behind the transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, examining how this evolution reflects India's ambitions to lead the Global South across a vastly expanded geographic footprint. The session covered the critical imperatives of MAHASAGAR in terms of maritime trade, sustainable development, environmental stewardship, regional cooperation, and broader geopolitical dynamics.

**Dr Cchavi Vasisht** began the session by contextualising the shift from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR, explaining that while SAGAR had been a transformative vision centred on the Indian Ocean, India's expanding global aspirations demanded a broader and more inclusive framework. She explained that MAHASAGAR extends India's maritime engagement to the entire Global South, marking not merely a geographical expansion but India's deeper leadership ambitions as the voice and vanguard of developing nations. She highlighted the Indian Ocean's criticality as a conduit for 80 per cent of India's crude oil and 95 per cent of trade by volume, while highlighting vulnerabilities at strategic chokepoints including the Strait of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Mozambique Channel. India's approach, she emphasised, builds on the foundation of a whole-of-government approach, public-private partnerships, and the inclusion of coastal communities.

Dr Vasisht identified India's 2015 maritime security strategy as a turning point that shifted the country from a narrow regional focus to an outward-looking posture by introducing the Indo-Pacific concept. However, she stressed that this strategy now requires revision under the MAHASAGAR framework. She also highlighted India's efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and boost indigenous capabilities as China expands its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. With defence exports, including BrahMos missiles to Vietnam and the Philippines, joint production ventures with Thailand and Malaysia, white-shipping agreements, and IFC-IOR, programmes such as Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), the National Centre for Good Governance, and many more have an impact beyond the numbers.



She stressed that the path forward requires strategic alignment, bridging the gap between India's aspirations and its capabilities, including coordination among various ministries, fleet modernisation, and regional consensus-building.

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia offered a sharp analytical distinction at the outset, questioning whether MAHASAGAR should be regarded as an initiative or a broader vision yet to be transformed into actionable policy. He assessed that MAHASAGAR remains a vision encompassing trade for development, capacity building for sustainable growth, maritime security for a shared future, and cooperation through technology and training, but one that still awaits an implementation architecture.

He proposed two major dimensions of interpretation for the elevation from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR. The first was a template for bilateral cooperation, anchored in the significance of the Prime Minister announcing MAHASAGAR from Mauritius. He highlighted the India–Mauritius relationship as built on five pillars: political cooperation, maritime security and defence collaboration, economic and development partnership, soft power linkages, and people-to-people connections. These elements together serve as a flexible model demonstrating that a large nation and a smaller one can forge partnerships based on mutual respect, trust, and equality.

The second dimension was geographic expansion, which the Ambassador articulated through a five-level concentric circle model. The innermost circle comprised the Colombo Security Conclave, comprising India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius, Bangladesh, and the Seychelles. The second circle encompassed Indian Ocean island nations, including Comoros, Madagascar, the Seychelles, and more. The third extended across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) from Eastern Africa to Western Australia. The fourth included the Indo-Pacific, covering nearly two-thirds of the globe. The fifth and largest circle encompassed the entire Global South, which includes all the above plus Central Asia, Latin America, and all of Africa.

However, the Ambassador identified four formidable challenges to translating this vision into an implementable initiative. First, India's two-and-a-half front threat, with simultaneous pressures from Pakistan, China, and internal instability (the 'half' front). This hostile arc – west, north, and east – poses a critical challenge for activating any outward maritime vision such as MAHASAGAR. Second, geopolitical complexities require India to balance Global South championing with managing ties with strategic partners who may disagree with parts of this agenda. Third, clarity is needed on whether to prioritise between the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Fourth, Global South leadership is contested, with Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and groupings such as BRICS also aspiring to lead. He counselled that India must approach this ambition with realism and humility.

Ms Swati Ganeshan anchored her intervention in the environmental and sustainability dimensions of MAHASAGAR. She highlighted India's commitments to major global frameworks, including the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to protect 30 per cent of the world's land, inland waters, and seas by 2030. She noted that India advocates the equitable sharing of ocean benefits and has aligned MAHASAGAR's objectives with these sustainability goals.

She drew attention to India's concrete steps toward sustainable shipping, including signing a carbon

tax on commercial vessels over 5,000 tonnes and ratifying the IMO 2020 Sulfur Agreement. India's progress in seabed mining, marine genetic resource management, and offshore energy development, including commissioning offshore wind farms and advancing deep-sea wind energy beyond 20 miles from the coast, was highlighted as aligned with MAHASAGAR's broader vision.

She addressed critical environmental challenges, including ocean acidification, declining oxygen levels, rapid loss of marine biodiversity, and increasing cyclone frequency, stressing the urgent need to prioritise climate resilience alongside disaster response. Food security emerged as a central concern, particularly for small island nations, with India positioned to become a net provider of aquatic food resources amid a growing global demand for 220 million tonnes annually. She referenced India's 2020 blue economy draft policy and its recognition of the strategic Seychelles–Singapore–Samoa (SSS) axis as consistent with MAHASAGAR's regional scope.

She called for cohesive integration of existing frameworks such as the Neighbourhood First Policy, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), International Solar Alliance (ISA), and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), under the MAHASAGAR umbrella. She stressed the need for a regional governance framework for sustainable fisheries, strengthened early warning systems through partnerships such as the Coral Security Dialogue, and greater investment in marine sciences, Antarctic research, and capacity building. She concluded by noting that small, focused groupings such as the Quad have proven effective for urgent issue alignment and expressed optimism for MAHASAGAR's potential, while underscoring the urgent need to move from vision to actionable steps within the critical five-year window remaining to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The session produced a comprehensive and multi-layered assessment of the MAHASAGAR framework. A clear understanding emerged that MAHASAGAR represents a significant and ambitious expansion of India's maritime vision, but one that remains at the conceptual stage and requires urgent translation into implementable policy. The path forward demands strategic alignment across governance institutions, doctrinal revision, environmental stewardship, and sustained engagement with the Global South, pursued with both ambition and the realism that India's complex security environment demands.

## SESSION 2 | THE CURRENT SECURITY CONTEXT

### MODERATOR



**SK TRIPATHI**  
Former Chief,  
R&AW

### PANELISTS



**NITIN GOKHALE**  
Founder,  
StratNews Global



**DR. SHALINI CHAWLA**  
Distinguished Fellow,  
Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS),  
New Delhi



**COL VIVEK CHADHA (RETD)**  
Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA



**BRIG. RAHUL BHONSLE**  
Director,  
Security Risks Asia, New Delhi

The second session of the conference focused on India's immediate security environment in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack and India's Operation Sindoor. Each speaker offered a distinct analytical perspective, collectively building a comprehensive picture of the threats India faces and the strategic recalibrations required to navigate an increasingly complex security landscape.

Moderating the session, Mr S K Tripathi began his remarks by emphasising that Pakistan's longstanding policy of using terrorism as an instrument of war against India, as demonstrated by the Pahalgam attack, stands fully exposed. He noted that India has made it abundantly clear that any terrorist activity on its soil backed by Pakistan-based terror groups will be met with strong and resolute countermeasures. He highlighted India's military responses, including precision surgical strikes after the Uri incident, the targeting of terrorist infrastructure in Balakot following the Pulwama attack, and the destruction of terrorist camps deep inside Pakistan through precision airstrikes. He stressed that India has categorically stated that terrorism originating from across the border will be treated as an act of war and will receive a corresponding response militarily, diplomatically, and economically.

He further noted that India's response has extended beyond military retaliation to include comprehensive diplomatic and economic measures. He cited the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, cessation of bilateral trade, restriction of visa regimes, and strict action against illegal Pakistani migrants as signifying a comprehensive recalibration of India's policy towards Pakistan. However, he acknowledged that while strong countermeasures are important, addressing root causes and exploring dialogue possibilities remain essential. He pointed to the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir as the main issue, noting that a part of this territory remains under illegal occupation by Pakistan and must be settled. Alongside Pakistan, India faces a growing challenge in its eastern neighbourhood. He further stated that the potential for Pakistan-China strategic collaboration to extend to Bangladesh poses a significant threat, and that the possibility of a full-fledged three-front war is quite real. He recommended developing a national refugee law that makes a clear legal distinction between a refugee and an illegal migrant, issuing biometric national identity cards to all Indian citizens, tracking illegal immigrants, and strengthening border management. Cooperation with international organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is essential. Mr Tripathi concluded by highlighting India's significant departure from past policy through its expressed willingness to engage Pakistan on Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and cross-border terrorism.



Mr Nitin A. Gokhale opened his remarks by setting the broader context, emphasising that 2024 witnessed the highest number of conflicts since World War II, including the Russia-Ukraine war, Gaza war, Myanmar crisis, and Sudanese civil war. For India, he noted, the volatility in the neighbourhood is particularly alarming, with growing concerns emanating from Bangladesh and China's posture, especially along the strategic Siliguri Corridor, which has considerably heightened regional tensions.

He raised an important dimension regarding Pakistan's underlying intentions in the recent attack on India in Pahalgam. He assessed that as India works to normalise the situation in Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan sought to reignite its influence in the region by provoking conflict and thereby disrupting India's developmental progress. Pakistan's internal situation was also a factor – the Army's standing at home had deteriorated. By leveraging local recruits to destroy the notion of normalcy in Kashmir and destabilise the Kashmiri economy, while fostering a communal divide within India, Pakistan aimed to sustain a prolonged conflict to slow down India's economic progress.

However, he highlighted that India responded with punitive and precise strikes through Operation Sindoor, overcoming conventional hesitations by redefining the established red lines and leveraging a modernised arsenal to strike terrorist infrastructure with demonstrated lethality. He stressed that while India's stand-off weapons performed effectively, the Chinese-supplied arsenal in Pakistan's possession remains a worrying factor that demands sustained attention. On the broader geopolitical front, he observed that India stands largely alone in war, peace, and narrative-building. As a major country like India grows, others increasingly treat it as an adversary. He proposed that India must reevaluate its priorities by enhancing analysis of China's intentions, pursuing smart defence spending, emphasising technology-driven strategies, and recognising the growing significance of space warfare as a critical domain of future conflict.

Dr Shalini Chawla focused on the primary motives of the Pahalgam attack from both domestic and neighbourhood perspectives. She assessed that while the returning normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir had fuelled the intention to attack, Pakistan's internal crises significantly exacerbated these motivations. Economic difficulties had forced heavy reliance on external institutions and powers, the military's reputation had suffered damage during the tenure of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and internal governance challenges remained a persistent concern. Against this backdrop, she noted that General Asim Munir had critically miscalculated the scale and precision of India's retaliatory response.

She placed particular emphasis on the role of false narratives in shaping conflict dynamics. The nuclear threat, she observed, had been a recurring factor constraining India's response calculus in past confrontations. However, Operation Sindoor disrupted these narratives decisively by providing clear evidence of India's capability and willingness to act, thereby revealing the narrative war as a central component of the broader conflict. She highlighted Pakistan's well-established tactic of converting post-conflict defeat into perceived victory, a pattern central to its narrative-building strategy that has significantly shaped national security discourse on both sides. She further noted that substantial financial resources are invested in social media platforms to spread misinformation and influence public perception, making information warfare an inseparable dimension of the conflict.

Turning to Pakistan's internal power dynamics, she assessed that General Munir's position has become more powerful than ever, with the military establishment leveraging fresh narratives against India

to manage domestic protests and consolidate authority. Looking ahead, she expected that military modernisation would remain Pakistan's overriding priority at the expense of social and economic development. She anticipated continued and deepening support from China and Türkiye, with Pakistan expected to expand its footprint in India's neighbourhood with Chinese assistance. She pointed to the emerging trilateral dialogue between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China as a concerning development, stressing that the power dynamics in the region are shaped by terrorism and that Pakistan's survival rationale remains anchored in the perpetuation of terrorism, which in turn justifies its military posture.

Col Vivek Chadha offered a distinctive historical and philosophical perspective by evaluating India's Operation Sindoor through the civilisational concept of Dharma Yuddha. He drew a significant connection between India's ancient strategic traditions and the contemporary Pahalgam attack, raising the pertinent question of whether moral ground facilitates success in a world dominated by realism.

He explained the Western framework of Just War theory through its two foundational pillars, Jus ad Bellum, which defines the conditions for the use of force, and Jus in Bello, which governs the conduct of war itself. However, he argued that the civilisational idea of Dharma Yuddha holds greater relevance than the Just War framework. He identified several key enablers of Dharma Yuddha: maintaining a high moral ground throughout the conflict, employing judicious force, leveraging the power of narrative, building sustained military capacity, practising detached perseverance, and treating the use of force as a last resort. He concluded that while the cost of war is inevitable, it is justified when fought on moral grounds, and that India's response to the Pahalgam attack embodied precisely this principle.

Brigadier Rahul Bhonsle broadened the strategic frame by examining the asymmetric and non-conventional dimensions of the threats India faces. He underscored that China is effectively winning without fighting, employing Sun Tzu's philosophy of achieving victory through non-combative means such as economic leverage, military partnerships, and grey-zone influence operations. Simultaneously, he noted that Pakistan employs terrorism and nuclear weapons as alternative tools of statecraft to pursue its objectives.

He highlighted that India's strategic goal is to avoid war while pursuing the vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047. However, he cautioned that neither Pakistan nor China may avoid conflict, necessitating preparedness across India's military domains. Türkiye's role was also flagged, with Ankara providing advanced drone technology and extensive training that strengthens Pakistan's military posture. He drew attention to China's strategy of supporting Pakistan through a 'Beg, Borrow, Steal' approach, which is likely to enhance Pakistan's capabilities over time.

He further explained China's expanding military support across multiple countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and nations along Africa's eastern coast. He stressed that terrorism functions as a tool for internal survival for certain states, and that India must therefore prepare for sustained punitive deterrence while simultaneously leveraging narrative power to counter these evolving threats effectively.

The discussions reinforced that India's response through Operation Sindoor marked a significant inflection point, but sustained preparedness, technological modernisation, and resilient narrative strategies will be essential to safeguarding India's national interests in an increasingly contested environment.

## SESSION 3 | SECURING THE SEAS: MARITIME SECURITY THREATS AND CHALLENGES

### MODERATOR



**PROF. CHINTAMANI MAHAPATRA**  
Founder and Honorary Chairman,  
Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies

### PANELISTS



**JAYANT MISRA**  
Member Executive Council,  
MP - IDSA



**DR. (PROF.) A. SUBRAMANYAM RAJU**  
Professor,  
Centre for South Asian Studies,  
Pondicherry University



**DR. PRAGYA PANDEY**  
Research Fellow,  
ICWA

The third session of the conference highlighted the full spectrum of maritime security threats confronting India and the broader Indian Ocean region. Each speaker brought a distinct perspective, providing a comprehensive assessment of the challenges India must navigate to secure its seas and advance its MAHASAGAR vision.

Prof. Chintamani Mohapatra, who served as both moderator and speaker, opened the session by raising a foundational question that framed the entire discussion: Are maritime threats limited to the sea, or do their roots lie inland as well? This question challenged the conventional separation of maritime and terrestrial security, urging participants to recognise the deep interconnectedness between the two domains.

He reflected on India's strategic history, noting how Pakistan's sudden attacks caught India off guard in 1948 and again in 1965, reinforcing the enduring need for robust early-warning mechanisms and better anticipation of adversarial intent. These historical lessons, he argued, remain directly relevant to India's contemporary security posture. He also drew particular attention to the strategic challenge emanating from Bangladesh and pointed to the acute vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor, commonly referred to as the 'chicken's neck', which connects India's northeastern states to the mainland through a narrow strip of territory. He cautioned that India must not allow complacency to erode the hard-earned lessons of regional security, particularly at a time when the neighbourhood is marked by heightened instability and shifting alignments.

He stressed the importance of diplomatic narrative management in contemporary conflict environments, using the example of President Trump's silence during Operation Sindoor to illustrate how the absence of external diplomatic engagement can shape the trajectory of a crisis. He stressed that in an era where perception and narrative carry strategic weight equal to military capability, India must invest as deliberately in its diplomatic messaging as it does in its defence modernisation.

Mr Jayant Misra stressed that India's Maritime Domain Awareness is fundamentally a multi-agency responsibility involving the Navy, Coast Guard, customs, marine police, and several other agencies.



However, he pointed out that inter-agency awareness and training remain suboptimal, creating operational gaps that adversaries and criminal networks can exploit. He highlighted the governance complexity underpinning India's blue economy, noting that over 30 ministries are stakeholders in the maritime domain, which adds layers of bureaucratic challenge to an already demanding security environment.

He drew attention to India's increasing maritime outreach to Africa, Latin America, and Pacific Island nations. He argued that India's credibility as a maritime security provider depends not merely on strategic pronouncements but on the tangible transfer of skills, institutional knowledge, and operational capabilities to partner nations.

He outlined the wide array of maritime threats confronting India and the region, such as piracy, smuggling, irregular migration, undersea cyber threats, and environmental crimes, emphasising that the misuse of advanced technology and fragmented legal frameworks across jurisdictions significantly hinder regional enforcement efforts. He advocated the establishment of national information-sharing centres, enhanced training programmes, and technology transfer mechanisms. He also called for greater public-private cooperation and the active involvement of think tanks and universities in building India's maritime security ecosystem. He concluded with a reference to the Mahabharata, underscoring the intangible but strategic value of preparedness and knowledge in securing maritime spaces.

**Prof. A. Subramanyam Raju** offered a macro-level perspective on India's maritime identity and the governance challenges of the global ocean commons. Despite the overwhelming dependence on the oceans, only 5 per cent of ocean resources have been explored, pointing to both the vulnerability and the untapped potential of the maritime domain.

He outlined India's formidable maritime geography, including an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spanning 3.7 million square kilometres, a coastline extending over 11,000 kilometres, including islands, and more than 1,200 islands scattered across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. He stressed that India is inherently a maritime nation and introduced the concept of 'Maritime India' as a necessary complement to the more traditional understanding of 'Continental India'. He emphasised that balancing security, development, and sustainability across this vast maritime expanse is not optional but foundational to India's future trajectory.

He highlighted a range of growing maritime risks that demand urgent attention, such as piracy extending beyond United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)-defined limits, oil spills, plastic pollution, biodiversity loss, and the widespread use of 'flags of convenience' that allow vessels to evade regulatory scrutiny. He flagged the emergence of pirates with potential terror links as a particularly dangerous development, urging better ocean governance, improved environmental data collection, and the development of comprehensive policy indices to measure and manage maritime risks.

He noted India's increasing and constructive role in regional maritime groupings such as IORA, MILAN (a biennial multilateral naval exercise), and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), alongside India's constructive participation in UNCLOS arbitration processes. He stressed that India's credibility as a maritime power rests not only on naval strength but on its willingness to contribute to the normative and institutional architecture governing the global ocean commons.

Dr Pragya Pandey contextualised the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific as vital global commons where peace and prosperity are contingent upon a stable and rules-based maritime order. She underscored the global significance of these waters by noting that 80 per cent of trade transiting the Indian Ocean is extra-regional in nature, meaning that any disruption carries consequences far beyond the littoral states themselves.

She addressed the full spectrum of common maritime threats, such as piracy, illegal fishing, and what she termed 'blue crimes', including human trafficking and drug trafficking, highlighting the existential threat these activities pose to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), whose economies and societies are disproportionately vulnerable to maritime insecurity. With growing multipolarity and intensifying US-resence and surveillance activities in the Indian Ocean, including at key strategic chokepoints, as a development demanding sustained vigilance.

She reinforced India's central role in regional maritime security through both institutional and informal engagements, citing the country's strengthened naval capabilities and sustained diplomatic outreach as evidence of its commitment. She introduced the MAHASAGAR initiative as a natural evolution of the earlier SAGAR vision and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, framing it as India's commitment to the Global South through transparent and sustainable partnerships, technology sharing, and concessional finance. She emphasised the role of IFC-IOR in enhancing maritime domain awareness and reiterated MAHASAGAR as a strategic and inclusive vision positioning India as the voice of the Global South.

She concluded by pointing to India's recent naval assistance missions and multilateral exercises as tangible evidence of the country's commitment to regional maritime security and cooperative growth. The third session delivered a thorough and multi-dimensional assessment of the maritime security threats and governance challenges confronting India. The discussions reinforced that India's MAHASAGAR vision can only be realised if it is matched by institutional reform, technological investment, and a comprehensive approach to ocean governance that balances security, sustainability, and cooperative partnership in equal measure.

## SESSION 4 | INDIA'S ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS UNDER MAHASAGAR

### MODERATOR



**SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI**  
President,  
Chintan Research Foundation

### PANELISTS



**AMB. PREETI SARAN**  
Former Secretary (East),  
MEA



**PROF. GULSHAN SACHDEVA**  
Professor,  
Centre for European Studies



**RUCHITA BERI**  
Senior Fellow, VIF

The final session of the conference brought together three distinguished experts – an economist specialising in India’s external engagement, a seasoned diplomat with extensive experience in regional partnerships, and a strategic affairs scholar focused on Africa and the blue economy – to examine the economic and strategic partnership dimensions of the MAHASAGAR framework. The discussions moved beyond the security-centric lens of earlier sessions to address the critical interplay between narrative and project delivery, the institutional architecture of India’s maritime engagement, and the blue economy imperatives that must underpin MAHASAGAR’s long-term success. Each speaker contributed a distinct perspective, collectively underscoring that India’s maritime vision will only be credible if matched by concrete economic outcomes, effective implementation, and sustained partnership-building across the Global South.

Prof Gulshan Sachdeva acknowledged that some definitional ambiguity persists in distinguishing SAGAR from MAHASAGAR, much like the unresolved ‘Look East’ versus ‘Act East’ debate, but noted that what stood out was the Prime Minister’s effort to link MAHASAGAR with the broader Global South agenda. He framed his analysis of the initiative around two critical dimensions: the importance of building a compelling narrative, and the simultaneous necessity of delivering specific projects. He stressed that these two imperatives must be pursued in tandem, as one cannot build narratives while ignoring concrete outcomes, nor can isolated projects achieve strategic coherence without being embedded in a larger vision.

He cited China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an instructive example, observing that Beijing has advanced not only infrastructure projects but also complementary global narratives through initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the Global Security Initiative (GSI). These frameworks, he noted, are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing, and India must learn from this approach by ensuring that every port construction or development project under MAHASAGAR is aligned with a clear overarching vision to maximise strategic impact.



He emphasised that India's role as a net security provider, alongside its contributions to climate action, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance, must remain central to the MAHASAGAR framework. He observed that the Global South itself has evolved – it is no longer merely a group of aid-seeking developing nations but now includes economic, strategic, and political powerhouses with growing intellectual capital. India, too, has transformed from a large democracy into a sustained, fast-growing economy with over 45 strategic partnerships since 1998 and participation in more than 15 trade agreements. He noted India's nuanced approach to economic integration by carefully staying out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to limit deep entanglement in China-led value chains, despite China remaining a top trading partner, with over 50 per cent of India's trade now centred in Asia.

He suggested that maritime trade must be prioritised as a strategic imperative for India's growth, with focused investments in ports, logistics, shipping, and maritime infrastructure to overcome the limitations posed by land border challenges. He also offered a measured word of caution, urging India to navigate its complex relationship with China thoughtfully, recognising that cooperation over conflict will accelerate development and unlock mutual benefits while keeping the MAHASAGAR vision aligned with practical outcomes.

Ambassador Preeti Saran anchored her talk on the evolution from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR as the vision brings a more systematic focus on India's maritime economic potential across the Indian Ocean and the wider Indian Ocean Region. However, she stressed that the real test lies not in the articulation of initiatives but in their effective execution on the ground.

She outlined India's maritime engagement within the IOR under seven broad established frameworks: IORA, IONS, India's Neighbourhood First Policy, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), IPOI, CDRI, and the Quad. She also highlighted important trilateral arrangements such as India-Australia-Indonesia and India-Japan-Sri Lanka, alongside India's active participation in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). She noted that the focus of these engagements is to address non-traditional maritime threats while maximising cooperative opportunities across the region.

She assessed that India's economic potential in the maritime domain is immense but needs to be harnessed in mission mode rather than through incremental or fragmented efforts. She recommended that India build trust and deepen partnerships with smaller littoral states and key regional players, including Mauritius, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and Egypt, leveraging India's established reputation as a benign and reliable partner, demonstrated through humanitarian efforts and sustained collaboration in maritime sectors.

She called for strategic investment in port infrastructure, shipbuilding, and blue economy initiatives, highlighting major projects such as Vadhavan Port, the National Maritime Heritage Complex, Maritime India Vision 2030, the expansion of the national shipping fleet, and the development of transshipment hubs like Great Nicobar Island as essential to positioning India as a global maritime power. She stressed that effective implementation requires active public-private partnerships, clear regulatory frameworks, and accelerated execution timelines. She specifically urged the engagement of major Indian private

sector players, including Adani Ports, GMR, ONGC Videsh Limited, and Petronet, to translate India's talent, strategic location, and accumulated global trust into tangible maritime growth and leadership. Without this decisive shift from planning to delivery, she cautioned, India risks allowing its maritime potential to remain aspirational rather than operational.

Ms Ruchita Beri focused her talk on the promotion of the blue economy as a central pillar of the MAHASAGAR framework. She highlighted India's ongoing efforts in this domain, such as the Sagarmala initiative, the Deep Ocean Mission, and sustainable fisheries programmes, and stressed the importance of sustainable ocean resource use for economic growth, ecosystem health, and equitable benefit-sharing across stakeholder communities and partner nations.

She drew attention to the shared challenges confronting nations globally, including the impacts of climate change, overexploitation of marine resources, and accelerating threats to marine biodiversity. She argued that these challenges reinforce the need for cooperative frameworks within the Global South to share knowledge, advance technology, and develop new financing mechanisms capable of supporting large-scale maritime and environmental programmes. She stressed that the Global South's collective strength lies not in isolated national efforts but in structured collaboration that pools resources, expertise, and political will.

She urged the swift finalisation and implementation of India's draft Blue Economy Policy, which has remained in its preparatory stages for an extended period. She advocated an all-of-government approach to blue economy governance, coupled with the active involvement of the private sector and research institutions to ensure concrete progress and effective management of maritime initiatives. She cautioned that without a formalised policy framework, India's blue economy ambitions risk remaining fragmented across ministries and agencies, diluting their strategic impact.

She concluded by emphasising the necessity of building strong foundations before expanding ambitious connectivity projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and Africa-focused maritime initiatives. She reminded all stakeholders that thorough preparation and coordinated action are essential prerequisites to realising the full potential of the MAHASAGAR vision – and that premature scaling without institutional readiness would undermine both credibility and outcomes.

The final session delivered a grounded and forward-looking assessment of the economic and partnership dimensions essential to MAHASAGAR's success. The discussion highlighted India's credibility as a maritime leader and voice of the Global South. This credibility will ultimately be measured not by the breadth of its vision but by the depth and consistency of its execution on the ground and at sea.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the four sessions of the conference, speakers offered a wide-ranging set of recommendations spanning maritime strategy, security preparedness, institutional reform, economic partnerships, environmental sustainability, and narrative management. These recommendations collectively chart a roadmap for translating the MAHASAGAR vision into actionable policy, strengthening India's security posture, and consolidating its leadership within the Global South. The following is a comprehensive compilation of all recommendations advanced during the conference:

- **Bridging the Maritime Aspirations and Institutional Capabilities:** There is a need to revisit India's 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy and update it under the MAHASAGAR framework to reflect the country's expanded geographical and strategic ambitions. Coordination among the many ministries involved in maritime governance is essential for coherent policy execution. In addition, clarity remains necessary regarding the relationship between the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific in India's maritime aspirations. In terms of existing national and regional frameworks, including the Neighbourhood First Policy, IPOI, IPEF, and many more, cohesive integration is still required. Alongside institutional reform, fostering greater public-private cooperation and involving think tanks and universities in building India's maritime security ecosystem will be vital to translating strategic ambition into actionable outcomes.
- **Coordination and Cooperation with Other Countries:** More impetus should be given to strengthening existing bilateral cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific across all pillars, including political trust, defence, economic partnership, soft power linkages, and people-to-people connections. Equally important is strengthening India's constructive role in regional groupings such as IORA, MILAN, and IOC, and continuing constructive participation in UNCLOS arbitration processes. In parallel, building strong institutional and logistical foundations before scaling ambitious connectivity projects such as the IMEC and Africa-focused maritime initiatives is essential, ensuring that thorough preparation precedes expansion.



- **Advancing Sustainability and the Blue Economy:** Leveraging maritime domain awareness and security networks to advance environmental development, with a strong emphasis on climate and infrastructure resilience, remains a key priority. This must be accompanied by establishing a regional governance framework to enhance food security, including better use of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations for sustainable fisheries. At the same time, strengthening early warning systems for climate-related events through partnerships such as the Coral Security Dialogue will be critical to enhancing regional preparedness.
- Alongside these efforts, increasing investment in science, technology, and innovation for the blue economy, including Antarctic research, marine spatial planning, and specialised training in marine sciences and fisheries, is essential. There is also an urgent need to move from vision to actionable steps within the critical five-year window remaining to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 14 (Life Below Water). This requires better ocean governance frameworks to address growing maritime risks, including piracy beyond UNCLOS limits, oil spills, plastic pollution, and biodiversity loss, as well as developing comprehensive environmental data collection and policy indices to measure and manage maritime risks.
- Furthermore, sustaining and expanding India's naval assistance missions and multilateral maritime exercises as tangible demonstrations of commitment to regional security will strengthen India's position as a net security provider. Swiftly finalising and implementing India's draft Blue Economy Policy, which has remained in preparatory stages for an extended period, is now a matter of considerable urgency. This should be pursued through the adoption of an all-of-government approach to blue economy governance, with active involvement of the private sector and research institutions. Finally, developing cooperative frameworks within the Global South for sharing knowledge, advancing technology, and creating new financing mechanisms for maritime and environmental programmes will be instrumental in ensuring that blue economy aspirations translate into tangible, equitable outcomes.
- **Aftermath of the Pahalgam Attack and India's Operation Sindoor:** In the recent Pahalgam attack and India's response with Operation Sindoor, enhancing analysis of China's intentions and its expanding role in India's neighbourhood is essential. India should also pursue smart defence spending that maximises capability without wasteful expenditure, while emphasising technology-driven and tech-enabled defence strategies across all domains. In this evolving threat landscape, recognising the growing significance of space warfare as a critical dimension of future conflict is imperative. Besides these, strengthening border management, cooperation with international organisations to address humanitarian and migration issues, tracking of illegal immigrants, issuing of biometric national identity cards to all Indian citizens, and enacting a national refugee law that distinguishes legally between a refugee and an illegal migrant are also recommended.
- On the diplomatic front, India must invest in diplomatic narrative management, given that the country stands largely alone in war, peace, and narrative building. Closely linked to this, India needs to develop robust counter-narrative strategies to combat Pakistan's well-funded misinformation campaigns on social media. India must also prepare for Pakistan's continued military modernisation, which will remain its overriding priority at the expense of social and economic development. At the same time, vigilance against the deepening engagement between Pakistan and China is required,

and India should anticipate and counter their expanding footprint in India's neighbourhood. More broadly, leveraging the power of narrative as a force multiplier in both domestic and international arenas and building sustained military capacity through continuous modernisation and readiness will be essential to safeguarding India's strategic interests.

- **Enhancing India's maritime security architecture:** Improving inter-agency awareness and training across the Navy, Coast Guard, customs, marine police, and other maritime agencies to close operational gaps is a foundational requirement. This should be supported by establishing national information-sharing centres to enable coordinated maritime domain awareness. Beyond domestic capacity, evolving India's maritime outreach to Africa, Latin America, and Pacific Island nations from an advisory role to hands-on capacity building in maritime law enforcement will strengthen India's role as a regional security partner.
- **Investing in data and analytics capabilities** to pre-empt maritime crime, alongside enhancing technology transfer mechanisms and structured training programmes for partner nations, will further deepen India's security engagement. Strengthening the role of IFC-IOR in enhancing maritime domain awareness across partner nations is equally critical. In addition, addressing the existential maritime threats faced by SIDS through cooperative governance mechanisms and maintaining vigilance against China's expanding maritime presence and surveillance activities at key Indian Ocean chokepoints will be necessary to preserve the stability and openness of the regional maritime order.
- **Strengthening Economic Partnerships:** Prioritising maritime trade as a strategic imperative, with focused investments in ports, logistics, shipping, and maritime infrastructure to overcome land border limitations, is essential to realising India's connectivity ambitions. This must go hand in hand with building trust and deepening partnerships with smaller littoral states and key regional players, including Mauritius, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Egypt, and other countries in the Global South.

Investing strategically in port infrastructure, shipbuilding, and blue economy initiatives, with a specific focus on Vadhavan Port, the National Maritime Heritage Complex, Maritime India Vision 2030, expansion of the national shipping fleet, and the development of transshipment hubs such as Great Nicobar Island, will be central to India's maritime growth trajectory. Ensuring effective implementation through active public-private partnerships, clear regulatory frameworks, and accelerated execution timelines will be the decisive factor in turning these ambitions into reality.

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## ANNEXURE

### Background

As India's maritime vision evolves to 'MAHASAGAR' (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions), it is essential to understand India's position in the current security context. Within the MAHASAGAR framework, India aims to consolidate its position as a 'Preferred Security Partner' and a 'First Responder' within the Global South. This strategic evolution, building upon the foundational principles of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region), reflects India's growing recognition of the Indian Ocean Region's (IOR's) pivotal geopolitical significance. However, the recent conflict between India and Pakistan has significantly changed the security context of the IOR. It has not only exposed the deep nexus between the Pakistani state and military establishment and terror networks but has also demonstrated India's firm resolve to fight terrorism.

The Indian subcontinent continues to be a playground for geopolitical rivalries and faces traditional and non-traditional security threats, while the IOR's strategic location makes it a crucial theatre for India's engagement with partners across South Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the wider Indo-Pacific. India must continue to strengthen maritime security, upgrade ties to a strategic partnership, and enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and effectively balance its role as a net security provider with its commitment to regional inclusivity – for which strategic adjustments are needed. In this context, the role of promoting naval diplomacy and comprehensive military capabilities by forging strategic cooperation through naval exercises and dialogue is particularly important.

MAHASAGAR also integrates economic and sustainable development goals by cementing India's leading position in the maritime sector. The Indian Government has undertaken Blue Economy Initiatives such as promoting fisheries management, ocean energy, deep-sea mining, marine biotechnology, and tourism. India, being a champion of sustainable development, is also focused on ensuring sustainable resource extraction. India's growing energy needs necessitate a critical review of existing policies to ensure responsible resource management. Boosting port infrastructure and coastal community development through the Sagarmala Project and Maritime Vision 2030 is part of leveraging the blue dividend. However, India's maritime strategy faces several key challenges.

Against this backdrop, CRF scheduled this day-long conference to examine how MAHASAGAR positions India as a pivotal player in shaping the future of the Global South by integrating security imperatives with economic growth and environmental sustainability. India's strategic location and extensive maritime domain necessitate a strong maritime presence and proactive engagement in the region. The overarching focus of the conference sought to develop actionable recommendations for strengthening India's maritime strategies by fostering dialogue and collaboration among policymakers, academics, and experts.

## Event Schedule

### Welcome Address

**Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi**

President, Chintan Research Foundation

### Keynote Speaker

**Admiral RK Dhowan, PVSM, AVSM, YSM (Retd)**

Chairman, Society for Aerospace Maritime and Defense Studies (SAMDeS), Former Chief of Naval Staff, Indian Navy

### Session 1: The Strategic Evolution to MAHASAGAR

**Moderator - Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi**

President, Chintan Research Foundation

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**Dr. Cchavi Vasisht**

Associate Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation

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**Amb Rajiv Bhatia**

Distinguished Fellow, Gateway House

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**Swati Ganeshan**

Visiting Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation

### Session 2: The Current Security Context

**Moderator - Mr. SK Tripathi**

Former Chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW)

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**Nitin Gokhale**

Founder, StratNews Global

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**Dr. Shalini Chawla**

Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

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**Col Vivek Chadha**

Senior Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP IDSA)

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**Brig Rahul Bhonsle**

Director, Security Risks Asia

### Session 3: Securing the Seas: Maritime Security Threats and Challenges

**Moderator - Prof. Chintamani Mahapatra**

Founder and Honorary Chairman of Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies

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**Jayant Misra**

Member Executive Council , (MP IDSA)

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**Prof. A. Subramanyam Raju**

Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry University

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**Dr. Pragya Pandey**

Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)

### Session 4: India's Economic and Strategic Partnerships under MAHASAGAR

**Moderator - Mr. Shishir Priyadarshi**

President, Chintan Research Foundation

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**Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva**

Professor at the Centre for European Studies, JNU

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**Amb. Preeti Saran**

Former Secretary (East) at Ministry of External Affairs

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**Ruchita Beri**

Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)

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**Organisers:** Dr Cchavi Vasisht and Lakshmi Kusuma Kotha

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