

Bringing Together Maritime Visions: India's SAGAR Policy and the India-Australia Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a critical arena for maritime security, strategic competition and regional governance. Despite growing scholarly attention to multilateral Indo-Pacific frameworks, the bilateral dimension of India–Australia maritime cooperation remains under-explored. This study addresses this gap by conducting a comparative qualitative policy analysis of India SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision and Australia's Indo-Pacific maritime strategy, examining official policy documents, strategic statements, defence agreements, and secondary literature. The analysis reveals that India and Australia demonstrate selective convergence in maritime security, freedom of navigation, and operational cooperation through mechanisms such as AUSINDEX, the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. However, alignment is limited in areas such as the blue economy, climate security, and structured engagement with Small Island and littoral states, reflecting the pragmatic and issue-specific nature of middle-power diplomacy and minilateralism. By linking theoretical insights on middle power behaviour to operational outcomes, this study shows how selective cooperation can reinforce regional stability and a rules-based maritime order while highlighting the limits of comprehensive governance. These findings offer both theoretical and policy contributions by clarifying how middle powers can exercise leadership in the IOR without formal alliances, with implications for broader security and governance dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords- Maritime minilateralism, India–Australia strategic partnership, SAGAR policy, maritime governance, middle-power diplomacy

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is increasingly recognised as a strategic crossroads of maritime trade, energy flows, and geopolitical competition. Rising naval capabilities, expanding sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and intensifying great power rivalries have made the IOR a central arena for rules-based maritime order and regional stability. India and Australia, as middle powers in the Indo-Pacific, have responded to these dynamics through independent but increasingly convergent maritime strategies. India SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), articulated in 2015, envisions inclusive security, cooperative capacity building, and sustainable development in the IOR, operationalised through mechanisms such as the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions (Modi, 2015; Indian Navy, 2018). Australia’s Indo-Pacific maritime strategy similarly prioritises regional stability, freedom of navigation, and operational partnerships, supported by instruments including AUSINDEX and the Pacific Step-Up Initiative (DFAT, 2013; Department of Defence, 2020).

While scholarship has extensively examined multilateral frameworks such as the Quad, comparative analyses of bilateral operational alignment and its governance implications remain limited (Brewster 2019; Scott 2021). This study addresses this gap by analysing the convergence and divergence between SAGAR and Australia’s Indo-Pacific maritime strategy, with a focus on operational outcomes, governance, and inclusivity. Drawing on middle-power diplomacy and minilateralism, this study conceptualises selective issue-based alignment as a deliberate strategy to reinforce maritime norms and regional stability without formal alliance commitments (Cooper, 2016; Tow, 2018).

Research Question: To what extent does the convergence between India’s SAGAR vision and Australia’s Indo-Pacific maritime strategy contribute to effective and inclusive maritime governance in the Indian Ocean?

To answer this question, this study adopts a comparative qualitative policy analysis of official documents, strategic statements, and secondary literature. The paper proceeds as follows: first, it outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework linking maritime security, governance, and middle-power behaviour; second, it analyses India’s SAGAR vision and Australia’s Indo-Pacific Strategy; third, it examines areas of convergence, divergence, and underdeveloped cooperation; and finally, it assesses the implications for regional maritime governance and

concludes with theoretical and policy insights on middle-power leadership, selective cooperation, and Indo-Pacific stability.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Maritime Security and Regional Order.

This study conceptualises maritime security and regional order in the Indian Ocean through a maritime governance framework that links legal norms, institutional practices and patterns of cooperation. Maritime governance is understood as the interaction between international legal instruments, regional institutions, and state practices, which collectively shape security and stability at sea. At the normative level, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a legal foundation for a rules-based maritime order by regulating freedom of navigation, maritime entitlements, and dispute settlement (UNCLOS, 1982). In this study, commitment to the UNCLOS and related norms is treated as an indicator of maritime governance. At the institutional level, minilateral and regional arrangements operationalise these norms. The Quad Joint Statements (2017–2024) reflect security-oriented cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness (MDA) and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), which are analysed as indicators of maritime security cooperation. Similarly, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and its Blue Economy declarations emphasise capacity building, sustainable ocean governance, and development cooperation, which are examined as indicators of inclusivity within the regional order (IORA, 2017). Drawing on the distinction between traditional and non-traditional maritime security (Mohan, 2012; Medcalf, 2020; Scott, 2018; Voyer et al., 2018), the framework recognises that while naval competition and balance-of-power dynamics shape strategic behaviour, non-traditional threats require cooperative governance mechanisms rather than alliance-based responses. Although the concept of a rule-based maritime order is well-established in the literature (Tow, 2018; Wilkins, 2021), this study addresses the empirical gap by examining how middle powers—specifically India and Australia—translate normative commitments into practice. By linking maritime security, governance, and inclusivity as analytical variables, the framework enables a systematic assessment of whether India–Australia cooperation contributes to a comprehensive regional order or remains selectively focused on security.

Minilateralism and Middle Power Diplomacy

This study uses middle-power diplomacy and minilateralism as an analytical framework to explain the selective convergence between India's SAGAR vision and Australia's Indo-Pacific maritime strategy. Middle powers are not dominant agenda-setters but states that seek to shape regional order through coalition-building, norm promotion, and functional cooperation rather than formal alliances (Cooper, 2016). Their behaviour is typically characterised by a preference for flexibility, issue-based engagement, and institutional participation rather than coercive or hegemonic strategies.

Minilateralism represents the operational expression of middle power diplomacy. As outlined by Tow (2018) and Wilkins (2021), minilateral arrangements involve limited membership cooperation designed to address specific security and governance challenges while avoiding the political costs of alliance commitments. In the Indo-Pacific, such arrangements—most visibly the Quad—prioritise practical cooperation in maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and maritime domain awareness (MDA). This study extends the concept of minilateralism beyond multilateral groupings by treating bilateral convergence as a foundational layer of minilateralism.

Within this framework, India and Australia are conceptualised as like-minded middle powers whose maritime strategies reflect shared commitments to a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and regional stability. However, middle-power theory also explains why their convergence remains selective, rather than comprehensive. Middle powers tend to prioritise areas where cooperation yields high strategic returns at manageable political and resource costs. As a result, India–Australia convergence is strongest in maritime security cooperation and strategic signalling, while areas requiring sustained economic investment, climate leadership, or deep engagement with smaller island states, such as the blue economy and climate security, receive comparatively less attention.

By applying middle-power diplomacy as an explanatory framework, this study interprets the convergence between SAGAR and Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy not as an attempt to construct a comprehensive regional order but as a pragmatic form of issue-specific alignment. This approach allows India and Australia to manage strategic competition, reinforce maritime norms, and enhance interoperability without assuming the obligations of alliance leadership to

do so. Thus, the framework clarifies how middle-power behaviour shapes both the strengths and limitations of India–Australia maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

India's SAGAR Policy

India's maritime strategy is articulated through a set of interlinked policy frameworks, with the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision, announced in 2015, serving as its normative foundation. SAGAR emphasises maritime security cooperation, economic development, capacity building, and inclusiveness, positioning India as a stabilising actor in the Indian Ocean Region (Modi, 2015). This vision is operationalised through the Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015), which outlines India's approach to protecting sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), countering maritime threats, and maintaining regional maritime stability (Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence [Navy] 2015). SAGAR has since been extended through the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019, which translates the vision into thematic pillars such as maritime security, disaster risk reduction, marine ecology, and capacity building (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2019).

At the operational level, India has developed several institutional instruments to implement the SAGAR. The Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in 2018, represents a concrete mechanism for enhancing maritime domain awareness through real-time information sharing with partner countries (Indian Navy 2018). By 2023, the IFC-IOR had linked more than 20 partner nations and several multinational agencies, facilitating coordinated responses to piracy, illegal fishing and maritime incidents. This operationalisation demonstrates how SAGAR moves beyond declaratory policy to practical security cooperation, reinforcing India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

SAGAR has also been implemented through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, which have become a visible expression of India's maritime diplomacy in the IOR. Operations such as Operation Rahat in Yemen (2015), disaster relief missions to Mozambique following Cyclone Idai (2019), and assistance to Sri Lanka and Mauritius after maritime accidents highlight India's capacity to deliver rapid maritime support to its regional partners (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2019; NDTV, 2019). These cases illustrate how SAGAR's emphasis on inclusivity and cooperative security is translated into practice, particularly in engaging with smaller littoral and island states.

Academic engagement with SAGAR reflects both its strategic ambitions and limitations. Pant and Saha (2020) interpret SAGAR as an attempt to reconcile India's strategic interests with inclusive regionalism, particularly through capacity-building and maritime security cooperation. Chaturvedy (2017) situates SAGAR within India's broader maritime diplomacy, emphasising initiatives related to HADR, maritime domain awareness, and engagement with Indian Ocean littoral states. Scott (2021) links SAGAR to institutional mechanisms such as the Maritime Security Strategy, IFC-IOR, and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), arguing that these instruments strengthen India's credibility as a net security provider, albeit with effectiveness contingent on sustained partnerships.

Simultaneously, critical scholarship highlights important gaps in implementation. Brewster (2019) notes that while SAGAR provides a compelling strategic narrative, it lacks a clearly articulated operational roadmap in areas such as the blue economy, climate security, and structured engagement with Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Progress under the IPOI pillars related to marine ecology and sustainable development has been uneven, with limited measurable outcomes compared to the more advanced security and information-sharing initiatives. This uneven implementation suggests that SAGAR's operational success remains strongest in the security domain, while its broader governance and developmental objectives are underdeveloped.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that SAGAR functions as a selective but effective maritime strategy, with tangible outcomes in maritime security and HADR but weaker performance in the economic and environmental dimensions. This selective operationalisation is critical for understanding how SAGAR converges with Australia's Indo-Pacific maritime strategy, particularly in the areas of security cooperation, while revealing shared limitations in advancing comprehensive maritime governance.

Australia's Indo-Pacific Maritime Strategy

Australia's Indo-Pacific maritime strategy is articulated through a series of strategic documents that emphasise regional stability, rules-based order, and maritime security. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2013; Department of Defence, 2020) highlights freedom of navigation, maritime domain awareness, and partnerships across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while successive Defence White Papers (2013, 2016) and the Defence Strategic Update (2020) prioritise maritime deterrence, naval

interoperability, and the Indian Ocean as a strategic theatre (Department of Defence, 2013, 2016, 2020). Collectively, these documents reflect Australia's security-focused, norm-driven, and operationally oriented approach, consistent with its role as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia implements its maritime strategy through practical instruments that enhance regional security and cooperation. The annual AUSINDEX-23 naval exercise with India strengthens interoperability, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and search and rescue operations (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2023; Republic World, 2023). . HADR operations—including support to Fiji after Cyclone Yasa (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020; Refugees International, 2021) and Tonga following the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption (Australian Department of Defence, 2022)—demonstrates Australia's operational capacity for regional assistance.

While Australia's developmental and inclusive initiatives, such as the Pacific Step-Up, primarily focus on the Pacific, Indian Ocean engagement is comparatively limited. This selective operationalisation mirrors middle-power behaviour: Australia prioritises high-strategic-return areas where capacity and political investment are manageable. Consequently, its convergence with SAGAR is strongest in maritime security, freedom of navigation, and operational cooperation, but weaker in the blue economy, climate security, and structured engagement with smaller littoral states (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2019; NDTV, 2019).

Compared to India's SAGAR framework, which spans the Indian Ocean with a broader governance and development vision, Australia's strategy demonstrates a targeted focus. Both countries exhibit issue-specific alignment: joint exercises, logistics sharing, and participation in minilateral arrangements such as the Quad, which reinforce shared norms and operational readiness (Quad Leaders, 2017–2024; Australian Minister for Defence, 2023). However, gaps remain in long-term economic and environmental engagement, reflecting the pragmatic and selective nature of middle-power diplomacy.

This analysis highlights that Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy in the Indian Ocean is both complementary to SAGAR in security domains and illustrative of the constraints of middle-power engagement: a strong operational focus, selective alignment, and avoidance of broad commitments beyond areas of immediate strategic return.

Points of Intersection

India and Australia have demonstrated significant convergence in their maritime strategies, as evidenced by their bilateral agreements and operational mechanisms. The Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA, 2020) and India–Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Joint Statements (MEA, 2020–2023) institutionalise cooperation by enabling logistical compatibility, shared operational planning, and enhanced naval interaction (MEA, 2020–2023). These mechanisms facilitate joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and interoperability, reflecting a high degree of alignment with Quad-led commitments to a rule-based maritime order (Quad Leaders, 2017–2024). Instruments such as AUSINDEX demonstrate practical operationalisation by combining anti-submarine warfare, search-and-rescue exercises, and coordinated maritime patrols.

While these mechanisms reflect substantial alignment in maritime security and normative commitments, their depth and scope remain selective. Operational outcomes suggest that convergence is strongest in security-focused areas, including joint exercises, information sharing, and logistics. For example, AUSINDEX 2023 enhanced bilateral naval interoperability through complex drills and real-time maritime domain awareness (MDA) exercises. Similarly, the MLSA has enabled faster deployment and shared access to facilities, thereby strengthening operational readiness. These examples demonstrate that India–Australia convergence is effective in reinforcing strategic security objectives, particularly in contexts in which cooperation yields clear strategic returns.

However, limitations of this partnership are evident. Areas such as the blue economy, climate security, and structured engagement with small island states remain underdeveloped (Busby, 2018; Busby, 2018; Scott, 2021). Although both countries acknowledge these issues in principle, there is no coordinated governance framework or operational mechanism to translate their commitments into sustained action. Cooperation with littoral and small island states tends to be project-based or episodic rather than comprehensive or institutionalised. This selectivity reflects a middle-power, minilateral approach, where strategic alignment is concentrated on security imperatives, while broader governance and developmental objectives receive limited operational focus.

In summary, India–Australia maritime cooperation demonstrates high convergence in the strategic and security domains, with measurable operational outcomes in joint exercises,

logistics, and information sharing. Simultaneously, the selective nature of cooperation highlights persistent gaps in non-security dimensions, underscoring that bilateral convergence, while strong, is issue-specific rather than comprehensive. Understanding these strengths and limitations is essential for assessing the potential of India–Australia partnerships to contribute to inclusive and effective maritime governance in the Indian Ocean.

Differences and undeveloped spheres

Although India and Australia are increasingly becoming strategic partners in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), their maritime cooperation exhibits significant gaps beyond security-focused areas. While both countries share interests in maritime security, freedom of navigation, and regional stability, their collaboration is uneven in extended maritime governance, particularly in the blue economy, climate security, and engagement with small island and littoral states (Modi, 2015; DFAT, 2013).

Blue Economy Cooperation

SAGAR and Australia's Indo-Pacific Strategy highlight regional development and sustainability in principle, but bilateral mechanisms for blue economy initiatives are limited in number. For instance, the Indian Ocean Rim Association's (IORA) Blue Economy Declaration (2017) identifies sustainable fisheries, marine resource management, ocean-based livelihoods, and inclusive economic development as priorities of the blue economy. However, India–Australia cooperation is mostly multilateral or declaratory, with no formal bilateral programs on joint fisheries management, marine technology sharing, or blue carbon projects. Consequently, economic and environmental dimensions remain secondary to security objectives (Brewster 2014).

Climate Security

Climate change is a growing maritime risk multiplier that affects disaster resilience, maritime infrastructure, and the livelihoods of coastal and island populations. Australia has acknowledged this in its Defence Strategic Update (2020), noting climate-related hazards as direct threats to regional stability (Scott 2021). India, through IPOI and SAGAR, emphasizes disaster preparedness and HADR, as seen in Cyclone Idai relief in Mozambique (2019) and Indian Ocean tsunami response exercises. However, institutionalised, long-term climate-security planning between India and Australia is absent, and cooperation remains largely ad

hoc and reactive, focused on immediate disaster response rather than proactive climate mitigation or joint regional planning.

Small Island and Littoral States

Despite articulated commitments to inclusivity, both countries prioritise engagement with strategically important partners, such as Seychelles, Mauritius, and the Maldives, while smaller or less geopolitically significant states receive less attention. For example, India's engagement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives includes maritime capacity building and HADR support, whereas Australia's Pacific Step-Up initiative concentrates mostly on Fiji, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea, leaving the western Indian Ocean under-engaged. This selective approach limits the agency of smaller states and reduces the comprehensiveness of regional maritime governance (Kaplan, 2010).

Together, these patterns indicate that while maritime security cooperation is robust, other dimensions of regional governance are underdeveloped. The blue economy, climate security, and small island engagement are currently issue-specific, reactive, or multilateral-only, highlighting the selective nature of India–Australia maritime alignment. Addressing these gaps is crucial for translating strategic convergence into a participative, resilient, and sustainable maritime order in the Indian Ocean.

Implications of Regional Governance in the Indian Ocean

Combined policy documents and strategic statements indicate that India–Australia cooperation contributes to maritime governance in the Indian Ocean by reinforcing norms, enhancing regional capacity, and strengthening security without creating formal alliance obligations in the region. Both countries share a commitment to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation, and peaceful settlement of disputes, which are fundamental pillars of a rules-based maritime order (Modi, 2015; DFAT, 2013). This normative orientation promotes flexibility in diplomatic and security interactions while advancing cooperative maritime governance.

Rather than creating new institutions, India and Australia have leveraged existing regional frameworks, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and issue-based multilateral platforms. Minilateral arrangements, such as the Quad, serve as flexible, interest-based mechanisms, strengthening maritime security,

humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and maritime domain awareness without the limitations associated with formal alliances (Quad Leaders' Joint Statements, 2017–2024). This approach demonstrates a middle-power leadership model focused on norm diffusion, capacity building, and collaboration, rather than direct power projection (Brewster, 2014).

However, selective cooperation presents long-term challenges to the sustainability and inclusivity of regional governance. Security-focused initiatives dominate, while economic cooperation, climate security, and engagement with small island and littoral states remain underdeveloped (IORA, 2017; Department of Defence 2020). If governance mechanisms are perceived as serving primarily the interests of major powers, smaller states may be marginalised, limiting their participation as active stakeholders and reducing the legitimacy of regional order.

Additionally, some scholars and regional observers have raised counterarguments regarding exclusivity and strategic rivalry. Some littoral states or extra-regional powers may interpret India–Australia collaboration, particularly in the context of the Quad, as geopolitically selective or balancing against China, potentially fostering distrust or perceptions of exclusion. While the partnership is intended to reinforce norms and stability, these perceptions could undermine broader inclusivity unless bilateral initiatives are complemented by transparent multilateral engagement and attention to non-security priorities.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of India–Australia cooperation in regional governance depends on balancing strategic convergence and inclusivity. Expanding engagement beyond security to encompass environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and the concerns of smaller island states is critical for establishing a legitimate, durable, and rules-based maritime order in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that India and Australia share a high degree of convergence in maritime security cooperation, operationalized through joint exercises, logistical arrangements and information-sharing mechanisms. These actions contribute to regional stability and reinforce a rules-based maritime order in the Indian Ocean, highlighting how middle powers can exercise leadership without formal alliances in the Indian Ocean.

Simultaneously, the analysis reveals persistent gaps in cooperation on the blue economy, climate security, and structured engagement with smaller island states. This selective focus shows that strategic alignment alone is insufficient for comprehensive maritime governance, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and multidimensional approach.

Theoretically, this study contributes to scholarship by linking middle-power diplomacy and minilateralism with practical maritime outcomes, showing how issue-specific alignment can shape regional order without formalised alliances. From a policy perspective, this suggests that expanding cooperation beyond security to include environmental, economic, and small-state engagement is critical for building a durable, resilient, and legitimate maritime governance framework in the Indian Ocean.

Self-Declaration

I declare that this paper is my original work, has not been submitted elsewhere, and all sources have been duly acknowledged.

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