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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# India's Island Diplomacy — SAGAR, SESEL and the Battle for the Indian Ocean

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**SUBJECTS COVERED****IR** **SECURITY & DEFENCE****GS PAPERS****GS2** **GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS2

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The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India announced the SESEL vision with Seychelles and a defence pact with Greece — how effectively has India's SAGAR doctrine translated into influence among IOR island and littoral states, and where does China's counter-presence pose the greatest risk?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

India announced the **SESEL Joint Vision** with Seychelles and a **Defence Industrial Cooperation Declaration** with Greece — part of an expanding strategic geography that builds India's presence at the margins of the Indian Ocean, from Western Island chains to European naval partners, as China's **String of Ports** strategy deepens.

## THE STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Indian Ocean is not merely India's backyard — it is the world's most critical commercial waterway. Over **80% of global oil trade** and **90% of containerised goods** pass through IOR shipping lanes. For India specifically:

**85–88%** of crude oil imports arrive by sea through the Indian Ocean

**70%** of India's total trade by value is seaborne

India's entire eastern and western coastlines, including major economic hubs (Mumbai, Chennai, Kochi, Kolkata) are IOR-exposed

**China's strategy — String of Pearls:** China has systematically built port access, equity stakes, and infrastructure investments at key IOR nodes:

**Gwadar (Pakistan):** CPEC's crown jewel; deep-water port with potential naval use

**Hambantota (Sri Lanka):** 99-year lease to China Merchants Port (2017) after debt-trap

**Colombo International Terminal:** Chinese state company BRI investment

**Kyaukphyu (Myanmar):** Deep-water port + oil pipeline to Yunnan

**Djibouti:** China's first overseas military base (2017); controls Bab-el-Mandeb approach

## SAGAR'S RECORD — ACHIEVEMENTS AND GAPS

**India's SAGAR doctrine (2015)** aimed to make India the net security provider for smaller IOR states and deepen economic partnerships. A decade in, the record is mixed:

### Achievements:

**Coastal Surveillance Radar Network (CSRN):** India has installed surveillance radar systems in Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles, Bangladesh, and Myanmar — creating a near-real-time maritime picture

**Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR):** Operation Dost (Turkiye/Syria 2023), Cyclone Idai (Mozambique 2019), Operation Raahat (Yemen 2015) — India as first responder

**Dornier Supply:** India has gifted or sold maritime patrol aircraft (Dornier 228) to Maldives, Sri Lanka, Seychelles — creating maintenance dependency and training links

**Naval base access:** Assumption Island (Seychelles), Agalega (Mauritius) — forward presence without permanent basing controversy

**Hydro-carbon:** India-Mauritius-Maldives trilateral submarine oil pipeline cooperation

### Gaps and vulnerabilities:

**Maldives flip-flop:** Ibrahim Solih was India-aligned; President Muizzu (2024) sought India's military presence reduction and explored Chinese economic engagement — India had to recalibrate

**Sri Lanka:** Chinese Hambantota deal succeeded partly because India did not offer comparable financing; India later provided USD 4 billion bailout (2022) but the port precedent remains

**Debt vs. Development:** China offers large loans fast; India's credit disbursement is slower and more conditional — smaller states sometimes choose China for speed

**Bangladesh:** Post-Hasina political transition created temporary uncertainty about pro-India infrastructure projects

## SESEL AND WHAT IT GETS RIGHT

The **SESEL** framework's emphasis on **climate action, renewable energy, and digital infrastructure** — alongside security — reflects a maturation of India's island diplomacy:

**Climate-first language** resonates with small island developing states (SIDS) for whom climate change is an existential threat (rising sea levels, coral bleaching, cyclones)

**Digital infrastructure** (submarine cables, e-governance) creates durable technology dependencies that outlast political leadership changes

**Blue economy framing** (fisheries, ocean resources) taps into Seychelles' primary economic interest rather than imposing India's security lens

This is SAGAR 2.0 — and closer in spirit to what the Indo-Pacific needs.

## INDIA-GREECE: EXPANDING THE STRATEGIC CIRCLE

Greece's decision to partner India in defence co-production and post a liaison at **IFC-IOR** is significant:

Greece commands a large and capable navy (4th in NATO by tonnage) with deep Mediterranean-to-Indian Ocean patrol experience

As an EU and NATO member, Greece brings India closer to European defence supply chains — diversifying away from total Russia-UK-France dependence

The Greece-Turkey rivalry gives Greece extra incentive to develop alternative partnerships beyond NATO

Greece's **Hellenic Shipyards** builds frigates and submarines — potential co-production opportunities for India's P-75 and Project 17A follow-on programs

## WHAT INDIA MUST STILL DO

**Speed up LoC disbursement:** India's Lines of Credit are often delayed by procurement/procedural red tape. Fast-disbursing infrastructure funding (like China's) requires streamlining MEA/Exim Bank processes

**Create an Indian Ocean Development Fund:** A dedicated concessional lending pool (like China's BRI Fund but with better governance standards) would give India a competitive financing instrument

**Technology partnerships over hardware:** Rather than gifting vessels (which require Indian maintenance), building local coast guard capability (training, software, surveillance systems) creates more durable ties

**Follow through on climate finance:** India's International Solar Alliance (co-founded with France, HQ Gurugram) should specifically target SIDS with solar and storage grants — not just loans

## UPSC RELEVANCE

*SAGAR (2015, Mauritius), SESEL, Assumption Island (Seychelles), IFC-IOR (Gurugram, 2018), String of Pearls, Hambantota Port (99-year lease), CSRN, CMF (Bahrain), CTF-154, MAHASAGAR. Mains GS-2: India's neighbourhood-first policy; SAGAR doctrine; India-island diplomacy; India-China competition in IOR; India-Europe defence partnerships. GS-3: Maritime security; blue economy; ISA (International Solar Alliance); India's Lines of Credit; BRI vs India alternative.*

### FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

#### SAGAR DOCTRINE:

Announced: **March 2015**, Mauritius, by PM Modi

Full form: **Security and Growth for All in the Region**

Extended version: **MAHASAGAR** (2025–30, adds Blue Economy + Climate)

#### INDIA-SEYCHELLES (SESEL):

50 years of relations (1976–2026)

Military access: **Assumption Island**

India supplied: Dornier 228 maritime patrol aircraft, patrol vessels

Seychelles EEZ: **1.37 million sq km**

#### CHINA STRING OF PEARLS — KEY NODES:

Gwadar (Pakistan) — CPEC deep-water port

Hambantota (Sri Lanka) — 99-year lease to China Merchants Port (2017)

Kyaukphyu (Myanmar) — pipeline + deep-water port

Djibouti — China's first overseas military base (2017)

#### INDIA COUNTER-PRESENCE:

CSRN installed in: Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles, Bangladesh, Myanmar

Naval access: Assumption Island (Seychelles), Agalega (Mauritius)

IFC-IOR (Gurugram, 2018): 21 partner countries + 4 multilateral bodies

#### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

ISA (International Solar Alliance): co-founded by India and France at COP21 (2015); HQ Gurugram; targets SIDS for solar deployment

Greece: NATO + EU member; 4th largest NATO navy; Hellenic Shipyards (frigates, submarines)

QUAD (India, US, Japan, Australia): maritime security forum; coordinates IOR + Pacific

BIMSTEC: Bay of Bengal grouping (India + 6 SE/S Asian nations); maritime cooperation pillar

Sources: The Hindu, PIB



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