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Look Seaward: Protecting the Indians Who Crew the World's Ships

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 The Hindu

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GS2

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THE LIFT LINE

India talks of becoming a maritime power, but power at sea is not only about warships and ports. It is also about the **lakhs of Indians who crew the world's merchant fleet**, and whether their own country can reach them when they are stranded, unpaid or caught in a war zone.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This op-ed by a former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations reframes the **diaspora** question. The Indian abroad is usually imagined as a software engineer or a Gulf construction worker; the **seafarer** is invisible, floating in international waters under a foreign flag, governed by conventions few citizens have heard of. That invisibility is precisely the exam-relevant gap.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood, **bilateral** and multilateral groupings, and the **welfare of the Indian diaspora**, including consular protection. **GS Paper 3:** The maritime economy, the **blue economy** and infrastructure such as ports and shipping.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: India supplies **around 15 per cent** of the global seafaring workforce and ranks among the top suppliers; the **Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), 2006** of the International Labour Organization is the “seafarers’ bill of rights” and covers abandonment; the **IMO and ILO jointly maintain the abandonment database**; India’s maritime vision moved from **SAGAR (2015)** to **MAHASAGAR (2025)**, meaning **Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions**.

For **Mains**, the argument is that India must build a **consular, legal and diplomatic architecture** for its seafarers, and that a genuinely seaward foreign policy treats crews as strategic human capital, not an afterthought.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Global shipping moves around **80 per cent of world trade by volume**, and it runs on a workforce that is largely invisible to the public. India is one of the largest suppliers of that workforce, with its share of the global seafarer pool crossing **12 per cent**, placing it among the top nations alongside the Philippines and China.

Two shocks have exposed the fragility of this position. First, **abandonment** has surged: unions and the IMO/ILO database recorded record numbers in 2025, with reports of well over **6,000 seafarers abandoned across hundreds of ships** and tens of millions of dollars in unpaid wages. Indian crews were reported to be among the **worst-affected national group**, with union figures citing roughly **1,125 abandoned Indian seafarers**. These figures come from union and database compilations and carry reporting lags, so they should be read as indicative rather than final. Second, the conflicts in **West Asia and the Red Sea** turned commercial sea lanes into risk zones, with merchant vessels struck and crews, including Indians, caught in the crossfire.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Abandonment is a legal orphan

Abandonment occurs when a shipowner cuts ties with a crew, leaving them without wages, provisions, fuel or repatriation, often in a foreign port. The **MLC 2006** requires owners to hold financial security to cover exactly this, yet enforcement depends on **flag States** and **port States** that may be weak or unwilling. A crew flying the flag of a small registry, employed by a shell company, stranded in a third country, falls between jurisdictions. The Indian seafarer's own government has limited standing unless it builds the tools to intervene.

Conflict zones and the consular gap

When a merchant ship is attacked or detained in a conflict corridor, the seafarer is not a soldier, not a tourist and not a resident. Existing consular machinery, tuned to diaspora workers on land, struggles with a crew that may never touch shore. The rescue of Indian nationals from vessels in troubled waters has shown both the reach of the Indian Navy and the **absence of a standing legal-consular protocol** for such events.

INSTRUMENT / CONCEPT	WHAT IT DOES	GAP FOR INDIA
MLC 2006 (ILO)	Seafarers' rights, mandatory owner insurance for abandonment	Enforcement rests with flag/port States
IMO/ILO abandonment database	Records and tracks abandonment cases	Reporting lags; recovery still case-by-case
Consular protection (VCCR)	Assistance to nationals abroad	Weak fit for crews in international waters
SAGAR to MAHASAGAR	India's maritime diplomacy vision	Under-links crew welfare to strategy

The strategic case

India aspires to be a **net security provider** in the Indian Ocean Region and has anchored this in the **SAGAR** doctrine and its 2025 successor **MAHASAGAR**. A maritime power that cannot protect its own crews sends a hollow signal. Seafarers are both a **remittance-earning workforce** and a reservoir of maritime skill for a growing shipbuilding and blue-economy ambition. Protecting them is not charity; it is the human dimension of sea power.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Frame the issue along **three axes**. **Legal**: does India have the domestic law and treaty **leverage** to compel repatriation and wage recovery? **Consular**: can the diplomatic network physically reach and assist a crew in international waters or a hostile port? **Strategic**: does maritime policy treat seafarers as core national capital linking economy and security? A seaward foreign policy scores on all three; a coastal, land-anchored mindset scores only on the first.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Indian seafarers (12%+ of global crew) -> exposed to abandonment + conflict-zone risk -> weak flag/port enforcement + land-tuned consular reach -> legal + consular + strategic gap -> build seafarer protection architecture (MLC leverage, dedicated cell, navy-diplomacy link, MAHASAGAR) -> secure crews -> credible maritime power

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Create a dedicated seafarer-protection cell.** A standing unit linking the Ministries of **External Affairs, Ports/Shipping and Labour** should track abandonment cases in real time and trigger rapid repatriation and wage-recovery action.

- ② **Wield MLC 2006 and port-State control.** India should press **flag States and insurers** through the IMO/ILO mechanisms and use its own **port-State control** to detain non-compliant vessels, making abandonment costly for owners.
- ③ **Codify a conflict-zone consular protocol.** Pre-agreed procedures with **navy escort, insurance and evacuation** rights for crews in high-risk corridors would convert ad-hoc rescues into reliable protection.
- ④ **Embed crews in MAHASAGAR diplomacy.** India should champion a **stronger global abandonment-recovery regime** and seafarer welfare at the IMO, turning its position as a top crew supplier into diplomatic leverage.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The theme connects to Mains GS2 questions on the Indian diaspora and consular responsibility, and to GS3 questions on the blue economy and India's role as a maritime security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. It also intersects with the SAGAR-MAHASAGAR strategic vocabulary examiners now expect.

Practice question: "India cannot claim to be a maritime power while its seafarers remain legally and consularly unprotected." Critically examine, with reference to the abandonment crisis and India's maritime diplomacy. **(15 marks, 250 words)**

Sources: ITF seafarer abandonment crisis, IMO/ILO work on seafarer issues, MEA on Vision MAHASAGAR

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