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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

SHANTI and the Bay of Bengal: India's Evolving Maritime Security Doctrine

 THE HINDU

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 The Hindu

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GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A doctrine framed around cooperation and norms sounds better than one framed around deterrence, but doctrines are tested in a crisis, not a communique. What would show that SHANTI actually changes Indian behaviour in a Bay of Bengal contingency, rather than just changing its vocabulary?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A doctrine is a promise about how a country will behave under pressure, not a poem about how it would like to be seen. SHANTI will mean something the day it changes a decision in the Bay of Bengal, not the day it is announced.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

India's maritime doctrines (SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, and now SHANTI) form a genuinely testable GS2 sequence, since UPSC increasingly rewards candidates who can trace policy evolution across named frameworks rather than treating each new doctrine as a standalone fact.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood; [bilateral](#), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies of other countries on India's interests.

For **Prelims**, memorise the doctrine sequence with launch years, and [BIMSTEC](#)'s membership and mandate as the institutional vehicle for SHANTI's first application.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
SAGAR (2015)	“Security and Growth for All in the Region”; India’s foundational Indian Ocean maritime doctrine	Frequently tested standalone acronym and launch context
MAHASAGAR (2025)	Successor doctrine broadening India’s maritime ambition beyond the immediate Indian Ocean Region	Tests whether candidates track doctrinal evolution, not just the original SAGAR
SHANTI (2026)	Latest doctrine emphasising norm-based cooperation over deterrence-first framing	The current-affairs-relevant newest layer in the sequence
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation	The institutional grouping chosen as SHANTI’s first practical test

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India’s maritime doctrine has evolved incrementally rather than through a single defining break. SAGAR, articulated in 2015, framed India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region while explicitly linking security to inclusive regional economic growth, a framing meant to distinguish India’s approach from purely military or purely extractive great-power engagement. MAHASAGAR, articulated a decade later in 2025, broadened this ambition as India’s naval capability and diplomatic reach grew. SHANTI marks the newest layer, explicitly foregrounding norms and cooperative frameworks, with the Bay of Bengal and the BIMSTEC grouping, spanning India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, chosen as the doctrine’s initial operational testing ground.

DOCTRINE	YEAR	CORE EMPHASIS
SAGAR	2015	Net security provider; security linked to inclusive regional growth
MAHASAGAR	2025	Broader ocean-wide ambition, expanded Indo-Pacific engagement
SHANTI	2026	Norm-based cooperation; Bay of Bengal/BIMSTEC as first test

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Why the doctrinal sequence matters

Each successive doctrine has not discarded its predecessor but layered onto it, suggesting a deliberate, incremental broadening of India’s self-defined maritime role rather than a series of disconnected rebrandings. Read together, SAGAR, MAHASAGAR and SHANTI trace India’s growing confidence in projecting a maritime identity beyond narrow deterrence, toward positioning itself as a rules-and-norms-oriented regional actor.

Why the Bay of Bengal is a sensible first test

Choosing BIMSTEC and the Bay of Bengal as SHANTI's proving ground is strategically sound: it is a comparatively low-tension regional grouping with existing institutional relationships, allowing India to build and demonstrate cooperative maritime security commitments, joint domain awareness, disaster response coordination, anti-piracy cooperation, without the higher-stakes friction of more contested waters further east or west.

The gap between doctrine and operationalisation

The recurring risk with successive Indian strategic doctrines is that the launch document generates substantial diplomatic and media attention, while the follow-through, concrete joint exercises, information-sharing architecture, capacity-building commitments, receives comparatively less sustained scrutiny. Without such follow-through becoming visible and verifiable, SHANTI risks being remembered as a vocabulary shift layered onto MAHASAGAR's ambition rather than a genuine strategic reorientation.

What would make SHANTI credible

A credible operationalisation would look like specific, time-bound BIMSTEC-level commitments, a joint maritime domain awareness centre, a coordinated [multilateral](#) exercise calendar, an agreed disaster-response protocol, that persist and expand over successive years, rather than a one-time announcement followed by ad hoc bilateral engagement dressed in SHANTI's cooperative language.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Distinguish a doctrine's launch language from its operational record, and judge only the latter.

Strategic doctrines are announced with maximal ambition and minimal specificity; their actual content is revealed only through the institutional commitments, budget allocations, and exercise schedules that follow. When analysing any newly announced doctrine, whether maritime, industrial or diplomatic, withhold judgment on its substance until concrete follow-through is observable, and treat the launch event itself as an opening bid rather than a settled outcome.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture three concentric circles drawn around India on a map of the Indian Ocean region, each larger than the last. The innermost circle, drawn in 2015 and labelled SAGAR, covers the immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood. A second, larger circle, drawn in 2025 and labelled MAHASAGAR, extends further into the wider ocean space. A third circle, drawn in 2026 and labelled SHANTI, does not extend the boundary much further outward, but changes the texture inside all three circles, adding a cooperative, norm-based shading rather than a purely deterrence-based one, starting its test application in the Bay of Bengal segment of the innermost circle.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Track BIMSTEC-level commitments over the next 12 months** as the concrete benchmark for whether SHANTI is substantively operationalised, not just the doctrine's launch language.
- ❷ **Institutionalise joint maritime domain awareness sharing** among BIMSTEC members as an early, verifiable proof point.
- ❸ **Establish a recurring, multilateral BIMSTEC maritime exercise calendar** covering anti-piracy, disaster response and search-and-rescue cooperation.
- ❹ **Publish an annual doctrine implementation review**, comparing SHANTI's stated commitments against actual joint activities conducted, to keep the doctrine accountable to its own language.
- ❺ **Extend proven Bay of Bengal cooperative mechanisms cautiously** to wider Indo-Pacific engagement only after they demonstrate sustained functioning, rather than announcing wider application prematurely.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has previously tested SAGAR and India's Indian Ocean strategic posture, and the doctrinal sequence through MAHASAGAR to SHANTI extends this as a live, evolving current-affairs theme likely to recur in both Prelims fact-testing and Mains analytical questions on India's neighbourhood and maritime policy.

Practice question: "A strategic doctrine is defined by its operational follow-through, not its launch language." Examine this claim with reference to India's maritime doctrine evolution from SAGAR through MAHASAGAR to SHANTI. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: A doctrine framed around cooperation and norms sounds better than one framed around deterrence, but doctrines are tested in a crisis, not a communique. What would show that SHANTI actually changes Indian behaviour in a Bay of Bengal contingency, rather than just changing its vocabulary?

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence

Source: SHANTI and the Bay of Bengal: India's Evolving Maritime Security Doctrine — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

India's maritime doctrine has evolved through three named framings, SAGAR (2015), MAHASAGAR (2025) and now SHANTI (2026), each broadening the geographic and conceptual scope of India's maritime engagement, with the latest iteration emphasising norm-based cooperation over deterrence-first language, and the Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC positioned as the near-term proving ground for whether this shift is substantive.



SUPPORTING

- Each successive doctrine has expanded India's self-defined maritime role, from SAGAR's regional security-and-growth framing to MAHASAGAR's broader ocean-wide ambition to SHANTI's explicit emphasis on norms and cooperative frameworks.
- Anchoring the doctrine's first practical test in the Bay of Bengal, through BIMSTEC, gives India a comparatively low-risk, high-trust regional grouping in which to operationalise cooperative maritime security commitments before extending the approach to more contested waters.
- A norm-based framing, if genuinely operationalised, could differentiate India's regional maritime posture from more overtly deterrence-focused approaches, offering smaller Bay of Bengal states a partnership model less freighted with great-power competition framing.



COUNTER

Doctrinal rebranding is cheap, and India's past maritime doctrines have not always translated cleanly into consistent operational behaviour; without concrete institutional commitments, joint exercises, information-sharing architecture, capacity-building programmes, SHANTI risks being read as vocabulary rather than a genuine strategic reorientation.



WAY FORWARD

Judge SHANTI by specific, verifiable BIMSTEC-level commitments over the following year, joint maritime domain awareness sharing, coordinated anti-piracy or disaster-response exercises, rather than by the doctrine document's language alone.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Trace the evolution of India's maritime security doctrine from SAGAR through MAHASAGAR to SHANTI. Examine whether this represents a substantive shift in India's regional maritime strategy or primarily a rhetorical repositioning. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's maritime security doctrine has evolved through three successive framings: SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region, 2015), MAHASAGAR (2025), and now SHANTI (2026), with each iteration broadening India's stated maritime role, and the newest framing emphasising norm-based cooperation as its distinguishing feature.

BODY

SAGAR established India's foundational post-2015 maritime vocabulary, positioning India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region while emphasising inclusive regional growth rather than purely military deterrence. MAHASAGAR extended this ambition further, reflecting India's growing blue-water naval capability and wider Indo-Pacific engagement.

SHANTI's emphasis on norms and cooperative frameworks, tested first in the Bay of Bengal through BIMSTEC, a comparatively low-tension, high-trust regional grouping, suggests a deliberate choice to build cooperative maritime security architecture incrementally rather than announcing a fully realised Indo-Pacific security framework. Whether this represents a substantive doctrinal shift depends on follow-through: joint maritime domain awareness sharing, coordinated exercises, and capacity-building commitments with BIMSTEC partners would constitute genuine operationalisation, while the absence of such concrete steps would suggest SHANTI is primarily a rhetorical repositioning building on its predecessors rather than a distinct strategic departure.

CONCLUSION

The doctrine's substance will be established not by its launch language but by whether India converts the Bay of Bengal test case into verifiable, institutionalised cooperative commitments with BIMSTEC partners over the coming year, the actual benchmark against which SHANTI should be judged.

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