



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

CONFERENCE BOOKLET

16th South Asia Conference

SAGAR to MAHASAGAR
Strategic and Development Partnerships

24 - 25 February 2026



16th South Asia Conference
on
SAGAR to MAHASAGAR
Strategic and Developmental
Partnerships

24-25 February 2026

Organised by
Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and
Analyses
New Delhi

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ABOUT MP-IDSA

The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence, security and international relations. Since its inception, MP-IDSA has served as a forum to debate important aspects of national and international security. Its mission is to generate and disseminate knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

MP-IDSA was established as a registered society in New Delhi on 11 November 1965. Over the last fifty-plus years, MP-IDSA has played a crucial role in shaping India's foreign and security policies, including with respect to nuclear weapons, military expenditure, and conventional and non- conventional threats to India.

MP-IDSA has a well-qualified multi-disciplinary research faculty drawn from academia, defence forces and the civil services, and which represent a diversity of views. Research at the institute is driven by a comprehensive agenda and by the need to provide impartial analyses and policy recommendations. MP-IDSA journals, monographs, briefs and books are the principal mediums through which the analyses and policy recommendations are disseminated.

Research Centres

- East Asia
- West Asia
- South Asia
- Military Affairs
- Internal Security
- Europe & Eurasia

- Counter Terrorism
- North America & Strategic Technologies
- Non-Traditional Security
- Nuclear & Arms Control
- Southeast Asia & Oceania
- Defence Economics & Industry
- Africa, Latin America, Caribbean & UN

ABOUT SOUTH ASIA CONFERENCE

The South Asia Conference is organised by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi. The annual South Asia Conference is an endeavour of the institute to bring together experts from all the neighbouring countries and discuss with them issues of contemporary relevance in an increasingly interdependent South Asia.

Since the countries in the South Asian region not only share many features of governance and structures but face similar challenges, the MP-IDSA conferences have attempted to engage policy makers, academics, civil society actors and young professionals in a dialogue on key concerns with the objective to achieve sustainable peace and security. This is the 16th South Asia Conference.

Previous South Asia conferences have dealt with the following issues:

1. Economic Cooperation for Security and Development in South Asia
2. Changing Political Context in India's Neighbourhood and Prospects of Security and Regional Cooperation
3. South Asia 2020: Towards Cooperation or Conflict?
4. The Common Challenge of Terrorism in South Asia and Prospect of Regional Cooperation
5. Cooperative Security Framework for South Asia
6. Prospects for Stability and Growth in South Asia
7. India & South Asia: Exploring Regional Perceptions
8. The Role of Media in Promoting Regional Understanding in South Asia
9. Culture as a Factor in Regional Cooperation in South Asia
10. Strengthening Connectivity in South Asia

11. Non-traditional Security Challenges in South Asia: Agenda for Cooperation
12. India's "Neighbourhood First" Policy: Regional Perceptions
13. Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Implications and Way Forward
14. Think20@G20: Towards a Resilient South Asia
15. Achieving Regional Economic Integration in South Asia

CONCEPT NOTE

South Asia and the broader Indian Ocean Region stand at a critical juncture, navigating complex challenges such as economic fragmentation, geopolitical rivalries, and escalating non-traditional security threats, including climate change and maritime piracy. Amid these dynamics, India's strategic frameworks—SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region, launched in 2015) and MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions, introduced in 2025)—offer a transformative vision for regional integration. These policies, complemented by India's Neighbourhood First approach, seek to foster a cooperative ecosystem that transcends traditional regional boundaries, extending beyond the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

By encompassing South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the African continent, both SAGAR and MAHASAGAR aim to align policies across this extended region, promoting economic prosperity through enhanced trade and strategic stability through cooperative security frameworks. The conference titled **“SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: Strategic and Development Partnerships,”** scheduled for 24-25 February 2026, hosted by MP-IDSa will convene leading scholars, analysts, and experts from SAARC countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka), Myanmar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and African Indian Ocean Region (IOR) partners to explore how a converging vision can drive greater integration at economic and strategic levels, ensuring a secure and prosperous region.

India's SAGAR policy, articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, reimagined the IOR as a shared space for collective security and economic growth. It emphasised maritime domain awareness, anti-piracy measures, and capacity-building initiatives, such as India's support for coastal surveillance systems in Maldives and Seychelles. SAGAR's success is evident in projects like the

SAGARMALA initiative, which has enhanced port infrastructure, and India's role as a first responder in crises, such as providing humanitarian aid during Cyclone Chido in 2024. However, SAGAR's scope was primarily regional, focusing on South Asia and proximate IOR states. Recognising the interconnectedness of global maritime and economic systems, PM Modi articulated India's vision of MAHASAGAR in 2025, creating fresh scope for fostering cross-regional collaboration.

MAHASAGAR builds on SAGAR by integrating South Asia with Southeast Asia and African countries, as part of an extended neighbourhood, promoting mutual advancement through white shipping agreements, joint maritime exercises, and blue economy initiatives. For instance, India's partnerships with Mauritius and Seychelles under MAHASAGAR would strengthen Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) security, while deeper engagements with ASEAN nations via the Act East Policy would boost connectivity projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. The African continent, home to a large part of the Global South, is a key fulcrum of the expanded MAHASAGAR vision.

The shift from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR reflects India's ambition to overcome the limitations of existing regional frameworks like SAARC and BIMSTEC. SAARC, established in 1985, has been hamstrung by Pakistan's recalcitrance, stalling progress on intra-regional trade, which remains a mere 5% of South Asia's total trade, compared to ASEAN's 25%. BIMSTEC, while more dynamic, is constrained by its focus on Bay of Bengal states and slow implementation of connectivity projects. MAHASAGAR transcends these boundaries by fostering a broader Global South coalition, inviting countries like Myanmar, Mauritius, Seychelles and other African countries to align their economic and security policies with India's vision.

This approach offers opportunities for smaller states to participate in high-value trade networks and non-traditional security frameworks, countering the dominance of external powers like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For example, India's free

trade agreements with Sri Lanka and Bhutan, combined with BIMSTEC's 2024 Charter, provide models for expanding trade linkages to Southeast Asia and African states, potentially increasing regional trade flows.

On the economic front, MAHASAGAR seeks to integrate South Asia's 1.9 billion-strong market with Southeast Asia's dynamic economies and Africa's resource-rich states in India's extended neighbourhood. Projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and Chabahar Port development demonstrate India's commitment to reducing trade barriers and enhancing connectivity. In a parallel effort, India is considering another connectivity project linking Kolkata to Sittwe and thence via Paletwa and Kaletwa in Myanmar to Silchar and Shillong in North-East India. Strategically, MAHASAGAR strengthens maritime security through initiatives like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Colombo Security Conclave and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and joint patrols, addressing threats such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, drugs and human trafficking and terrorism. By aligning policies across this extended region, MAHASAGAR could enable countries to coordinate policies on climate-resilient infrastructure, renewable energy, and disaster response, leveraging expertise for mutual benefit. For instance, India's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy and technical training under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program have built trust, paving the way for deeper strategic alignment.

The conference will explore how MAHASAGAR's inclusive framework can bridge South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the extended neighbourhood, offering an alternative vision beyond binary choices, focused on a human-centric path to development. It will address institutional weaknesses in SAARC and BIMSTEC, proposing solutions to enhance economic cooperation and connectivity. By pooling together diverse expertise, the event aims to generate policy recommendations that empower countries in the extended region to align with a wider vision, fostering a cooperative framework that prioritises mutual growth and progress in the extended neighbourhood.

Objectives

The conference seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- 1. Analyse India's Strategic Frameworks:** Evaluate how SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, and Neighbourhood First policies can enhance economic, security, and cultural integration in South Asia and the extended neighbourhood, building on initiatives like SAGARMALA, BIMSTEC, and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).
- 2. Address Geopolitical and Security Challenges:** Assess strategies to counter non-traditional threats (terrorism, climate change, pandemics) and balance China's BRI influence, boosting regional economic cooperation.
- 3. Strengthen Regional Institutions:** Recommend reforms to revitalise SAARC, enhance BIMSTEC's role, and bolster IONS, IORA, Colombo Security Conclave and IPOI overcoming institutional weaknesses and geopolitical divides.
- 4. Foster Cross-Regional Linkages:** Explore MAHASAGAR's potential to bridge South Asia with Southeast Asia and African countries, promoting Global South leadership through frameworks like BIMSTEC and India-Africa Forum Summit.
- 5. Identify Opportunities for Collaboration:** Propose actionable mechanisms for intra-regional trade, maritime security, and cultural exchanges, leveraging India's free trade agreements (e.g., with Sri Lanka, Bhutan) and connectivity projects (e.g., India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway).

Participants: Scholars and analysts from SAARC, Myanmar, Mauritius, Seychelles, ASEAN, and African countries, ensuring diverse perspectives without high-level political figures to maintain academic focus.

Format: Hybrid (in-person and virtual) to maximise global participation, reflecting post-COVID conference trends.

Expected Outcomes

The conference aims to produce:

1. **Recommendations** for countries in South Asia and the extended neighbourhood on trade agreements, maritime security frameworks, and cultural exchange programs.
2. **Strengthen linkages** among scholars in India's extended neighbourhood, fostering collaborative research and policy advocacy.
3. **Actionable Proposals:** Strategies to enhance intra-regional trade, institutionalise disaster response, and counter geopolitical challenges, shared with regional organisations.
4. **The conference papers will be published as a book**

Relevance

South Asia's strategic importance is underscored by its 1.9 billion population, growing economies, and its maritime significance. In this context, India's SAGAR and MAHASAGAR policies, launched in 2015 and 2025 respectively, reflect a shift from unilateral to cooperative regionalism, addressing challenges like low trade, climate vulnerabilities, and China's BRI. The conference seeks to bridge academic and policy discourses, offering solutions to integrate South Asia and the extended region while navigating geopolitical complexities.

This conference will serve as a platform to reimagine regional integration leveraging India's regional strategic vision. By addressing economic, security, cultural, and institutional dimensions, the proposed conference seeks to generate insights and recommendations to strengthen South Asia's role in the Global South, fostering resilience and cooperation in India's extended neighbourhood.

PROGRAMME

Day One: Tuesday, 24 February 2026

0900-0930: Registration

0930-1030: Inaugural Session

Special Address by Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy,
Director General, MP-IDSA

Release of MP-IDSA Books

Vote of Thanks by Dr. Smruti S. Pattanaik, Research
Fellow, MP-IDSA

1030-1045: Tea

1045-1245: **Session I: Economic Integration: Connectivity and Trade**

Chair: **Amb. Leela K. Ponappa**, Former Deputy National
Security Advisor

Speakers: **Mr. Jayant Singh**, Chairman, Land Ports Authority of
India (LPAI) - *"Land Ports as Anchors of Regional
Integration in India's Extended Neighbourhood"*

Mr. Yubak Dangol, Director, Nepal Intermodal
Transport Development Board - *"Nepal and Regional
Connectivity in South Asia"*

Dr. Prabir De, Professor, Research and Information
System for Developing Countries (RIS) - *"Strengthening
Regional Trade and Integration in South Asia: Role of
Maritime Corridors"*

Ms. Mandakini Kaul, Regional Coordinator for South
Asia, World Bank - *"Ports, Borders, and Investment:
Integrating Finance, Advisory, and Private Participation"*

Mr. Maiwand Safi, Researcher, South Asian University
- *"The Strategic Significance of Afghanistan in India's
MAHASAGAR Vision"*

1245-1345: Lunch

1345-1545: Session II: MAHASAGAR for Development Cooperation in the Global South

Chair: **Amb. Rajiv Bhatia**, Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Studies Programme, Gateway House

Speakers: **Rear Admiral Y. N. Jayarathna**, Former Chief Hydrographer, International Consultant - *“SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: A Concept in Need of Perpetual Changes”*

Dr. Aly Shameem, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Social Sciences of the Faculty of Arts, Maldives National University - *“Prospects for the Maldives for Improved Security and Trade Relations through the Vision of MAHASAGAR”*

Dr. Malshini Senaratne, Lecturer, University of Seychelles and Director, Eco-Sol Consulting - *“Small States with Big Oceans: Seychelles’ Blue Economy Model as a Development Framework for enhancing MAHASAGAR Cooperation”*

Dr. Hiacinter Burchard Rwechungura, Lecturer, Dept. of Transport and Nautical Sciences, Dares Salaam Maritime Institute - *“Consolidating Maritime Partnerships: India and Tanzania as Development Partners in the Global South”*

Dr. Abhishek Mishra, Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA - *“Resilience, Energy and Maritime Security in Mozambique: Assessing India’s Role in Supporting Mozambique’s Development”*

1545-1600: Tea

1600-1800: Session III: Reconnecting History: Cultural Diplomacy in South Asia

Chair: **Amb. Veena Sikri**, Former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh

Speakers: **Amb. K. Nandini Singla**, Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations - *"Cultural Diplomacy in India's Foreign Policy"*

Dr. Sandagomi Coperahewa, Professor & Head, Dept. of Sinhala, University of Colombo - *"Beyond Political Boundaries: Tagore's Vision of India-Sri Lanka Cultural Dialogue"*

Dr. Niloy Ranjan Biswas, Professor, Dept. of International Relations, Dhaka University
- *"Reconnecting History: Cultural Diplomacy, MAHASAGAR, and the Global South Reimagined from South Asia"*

Dr. Gaurav Bhattarai, Assistant Professor, Dept. of International Relations, Tribhuvan University
- *From Himalaya to MAHASAGAR: Making Sense of Nepal's Cultural Ties with India through Transit Access, and Open Borders"*

Dr. Ashok Behuria, Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA
- *"Dharma Diplomacy: Reclaiming the Mandala in India's Foreign Policy"*

Day Two: Wednesday, 25 February 2026

0900-0930: Registration and Tea

0930-1130: Session IV: Addressing Non-Traditional Security Challenges

Chair: **Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi**, Vice President & Dean, Faculty of International Studies (FIS), South Asian University

Speakers: **Mr. Dammu Ravi**, Former Secretary (Economic Relations), Ministry of External Affairs
- *"Non-Traditional Security Issues"* (Online)

Dr. Chido Mutangadura-Yeswa, Policy Research & Advocacy Lead, Africa Innovation and Research Centre, Nelson Mandela University - *"Towards a South-South Cooperation Framework on Climate Sensitive Security Governance"*

Mr. Ugyen Dorji, Assistant Professor, Royal University of Bhutan - *"Urban Freshwater Security in the Eastern Himalayas: Biodiversity Decline, Microplastic Pollution, and Bhutan's Pathways for Resilient River Governance"*

Mr. Kyaw Saw Han, Independent Researcher
- *"Common Non-Traditional Security Threats between India and Myanmar: Prospects and Challenges"*

Dr. Uttam K. Sinha, Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA
- *"Interdependent Resources, Interdependent Risks: The Food-Energy-Water Nexus"*

1130-1330: Session V: Navigating Geopolitical Dynamics in the Extended Region

Chair: **Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy**, Director General, MP-IDSA

Speakers: **Dr. Jabin T. Jacob**, Associate Professor, Shiv Nadar University - *"SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: China in the Way"* (Online)

Prof. Shahab Enam Khan, Executive Director, Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs, Dept. of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University - *"Beyond Hedging and Balancing: Bangladesh's Geo-economic Statecraft in an Era of Transactional Multipolarity"*

Dr. Juvence F. Ramasy, Senior Lecturer, University of Toamasina - *"Madagascar facing Geopolitical Dynamics in the Great Indian Ocean"*

Mr. Muhammad Waffa Kharisma, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Indonesia - *"Diversification without Depth: ASEAN-India Cooperation in a Fragmented Indo-Pacific"*

Mr. Amara Thiha, Non-Resident Fellow, China Program, Stimson Center - *"Myanmar's Coastal Frontier and Indian Ocean Security"*

1330-1430: Lunch

1430-1630: Session VI: Strengthening Regional Institutions

Chair: **Amb. Riva Ganguly Das**, Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs

Speakers: **Vice Admiral S.N. Ghormade**, Former Vice Chief, Indian Navy & Secretary General, Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) - *"Strengthening Regional Institutions: Colombo Security Conclave"*

Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi, Vice President & Dean, Faculty of International Studies (FIS), South Asian University - *"Indian Ocean Regionalism at a Crossroads: IORA, Interregnum, and the Anthropocene"*

Dr. Athaulla Ahmed Rasheed, Head of Centre for Security and Strategic Studies, Maldives National University - *"Role of Small States in Shaping Indian Ocean Regional Institutions: Framing Maldives' Security Narratives"*

Ms. Bineswaree Bolaky, Economic Affairs Officer, UN Economic Commission for Africa - *"Linking MAHASAGAR to Africa: India's role in the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement"*

Dr. Loitongbam Bishwanjit Singh, Assistant Professor, Dept. of South East Asian Studies, Manipur University - *"Relooking BIMSTEC: Optimising Advantages and Dealing with the Disadvantages"*

1630-1645: Valedictory Session

Chair: **Group Captain (Dr.) Ajey Lele**, Deputy Director General, MP-IDSA

Vote of Thanks: **Dr. Smruti S. Pattanaik**, Research Fellow & Conference Coordinator, MP-IDSA

Profiles of Participants
&
Abstracts

Special Address

AMB. SUJAN R. CHINYOY

Director General,
MP-IDSA



Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy is the Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi since 2019. He is a member of the Executive Council of the Society of the Prime Ministers Museum and Library (PMML) and Member, Governing Council, Indian Council of World Affairs. He was a Member of the All-Party MPs Delegation to the UAE and West Africa in the context of OPERATION SINDOOR.

A career diplomat from 1981-2018, he was Ambassador to Japan and Mexico and the Consul General of India in Shanghai and Sydney. A specialist on China and politico-security-military issues, he headed the India-China Diplomatic and Military Expert Group negotiating the confidence-building measures (CBMs) dialogue with China on the boundary dispute from 1996-2000. At the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) from 2008-2012, he handled external and internal security policy issues.

During his public service spanning 45 years, he has dealt with political, security, defence, trade and economic issues. His Foreign Service career included postings at the UN in New York and Saudi Arabia. He was the Chair of the Think20 engagement group for India's G20 Presidency. Amb. Chinoy has chaired the Mid-Term evaluation of the Modernisation Plans (III & IV) for Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs).

He speaks fluent Mandarin and is conversant in Japanese, German, French and Spanish. He is the author of "World Upside Down: India Recalibrates Its Geopolitics" (HarperCollins) and "Global Tumult: India as a Pole Star" (Rupa Publications) and has edited several books on defence, security and IR issues.

Chair

AMB. LEELA K. PONAPPA

Former Deputy National Security
Advisor



Amb. Leela K. Ponappa (retd.) was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service from 1970 to 2006. She was Deputy National Security Advisor and Secretary, National Security Council Secretariat from 2007-2009. She served as Ambassador of India to the Netherlands and Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (2005-2006). She was Ambassador to Thailand and Permanent Representative of India to United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) (2001-2004). Amb. Ponappa has held several positions at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) in New Delhi, as Joint/Additional Secretary for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives (1994;1998-2001), with intermittent charge of the East Asia, Northern and Pakistan/Afghanistan/Iran territorial divisions; Joint Secretary in charge of the Consular, Passport, Visa & Overseas Indians Division (1992-1994), Joint Secretary heading the Establishment Division (1990-92) and the SAARC Division (1986-1990), which she set up as Director. She dealt with India's bilateral relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan as Under Secretary from 1975-1978 and has remained engaged with the region thereafter. Her first assignment in MEA was as Under Secretary in the External Publicity Division (1973-75). She was Senior Directing Staff (Foreign Service) at the National Defence College, New Delhi, from 1995-1998. After serving as Deputy Consul General in San Francisco, in charge of commercial work in the western United States, (1978-82), she was a Research Associate at the Centre for South & Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley (1983-84) while also taking courses on Concepts of Data Processing and Data Based Management Systems.

Amb. Ponappa has dealt extensively with foreign policy; all aspects of national security and defence; India's relations with its neighbours

covering inter alia trade and investment, border negotiations, connectivity, infrastructure projects, external aid policies and programmes, river waters, disaster management, terrorism and narcotics, identity and migration, economic affairs including India-US trade and investment, negotiation and implementation of the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement and the India-Thailand Framework Free Trade Agreement; regional cooperation through SAARC, BIMSTEC and UNESCAP; personnel administration and development of organisational systems; capital budget management and implementation of major projects. She introduced computerisation in MEA in the 1980s for property, administrative, protocol and Haj matters.

Post retirement from Government in 2009, Amb. Ponappa has been involved with the work of several think tanks etc. She was Vice Chairperson of the Governing Council of RIS (Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries), Trustee of the Delhi Policy Group, Independent Member of the News Broadcasting Standards Authority (2013-19) and Chairperson of CSCAP-India, which is a member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, a Track II network of 20 countries (2010-20). She was the non-ASEAN CSCAP Co-Chair from 2012-14 and, inter alia, coordinated a major study on Regional Security Architecture. She has been a speaker at several conferences in India and abroad, a television commentator on international affairs, and a speaker at academic and military institutions. She was an Independent Director on the Board of Tejas Networks, a hi-tech manufacturing company, from 2016 to 2023.

Amb. Ponappa has a Bachelor's degree in English from Women's Christian College, Madras, a Master's in History from Madras Christian College, with University awards for both. She worked at the Indian Express, Madras before joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1970.

MR. JAYANT SINGH

Chairman, Land Ports Authority of India
(LPAI)



Mr. Jayant Singh is a career civil servant with three decades of experience across sectors ranging from logistics to training & capacity building and national security. His current appointment is of Chairman Land Ports Authority of India under the Ministry of Home Affairs Government of India. He has served as senior faculty member at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie. He also worked as Joint Secretary in the National Security Council Secretariat under Prime Minister's Office. He served with distinction as the Vice Chairman in Inland Waterways Authority of India where he worked extensively towards creating a viable Inland Water Transport eco-system and contributed towards doubling the quantum of traffic on waterways in two and a half years.

Belonging to the 1993 batch of the Indian Railways Traffic Service, he has served in various capacities in the field and the Ministry, most notably in Container Corporation of India, where he set up a number of multimodal logistics terminals and was associated with the launch of the first double stack container train in Asia. Prior to joining his current assignment, he served in NITI Aayog, premier government think tank where he handled Infra and logistics division besides Rural Development and Tourism. His interests include global geostrategic affairs, history and Political Economy.

LAND PORTS AS ANCHORS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN INDIA'S EXTENDED NEIGHBOURHOOD

Jayant Singh

Regional integration in South Asia and its extended neighbourhood has remained limited despite geographic proximity, shared histories, and evident complementarities in trade and production structures. The region continues to exhibit low levels of intra-regional trade and weak cross-border connectivity, particularly along land routes. While political mistrust, unresolved disputes, and fragile regional institutions are frequently cited as primary explanations, these accounts often overlook the structural role played by land borders themselves – both as sites of economic exchange and as instruments of state authority. Policy debates on regional integration in South Asia have tended to focus either on high-level diplomatic arrangements or on maritime connectivity and sea-based trade corridors. In contrast, land borders – where issues of trade, security, migration, and diplomacy intersect most visibly – have received comparatively limited analytical attention. This omission is significant, given that a substantial share of India's trade with its immediate neighbours, and almost all trade with landlocked partners, necessarily traverses land borders. India's regional vision, articulated through SAGAR and subsequently expanded under MAHASAGAR, has provided an important strategic framework for cooperative security and growth. However, this vision has largely been interpreted through a maritime prism. While maritime initiatives are indispensable, an exclusive emphasis on the oceanic domain risks underestimating the strategic and economic importance of continental connectivity. Land ports, in this context, represent the critical interface where regional strategy is translated into day-to-day economic and political interaction. This paper positions the Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI) as a key institutional response to this gap. It examines how the transformation of land ports from fragmented checkpoints into integrated trade and security nodes has reshaped the political economy of India's land borders, and how land ports can serve as an essential continental complement to India's maritime-centric regional frameworks.

MR. YUBAK DANGOL

Director, Nepal Intermodal Transport
Development Board



Mr. Yubak Dangol is the Director of the Nepal Intermodal Transport Development Board (NITDB), Kathmandu, with more than 20 years of professional experience in infrastructure development, engineering, and institutional management. He leads national-level initiatives focused on intermodal transport systems, trade facilitation, and connectivity infrastructure that support Nepal's economic integration and regional cooperation. His technical expertise is complemented by strong experience in project appraisal, construction management, and policy-oriented infrastructure planning. Prior to joining NITDB, Mr. Dangol served for over a decade at Nepal Bank Limited as Deputy Manager, where he worked extensively on infrastructure financing, project evaluation, and risk assessment. Earlier, he began his career as an Engineer at APEX Planning and Engineering Consultancy, contributing to the design and implementation of civil engineering projects. Mr. Dangol has participated in several national and international conferences and trainings on earthquake engineering, port development, arbitration and dispute resolution, strategic trade controls, and economic corridor connectivity. His work reflects a multidisciplinary approach linking engineering, finance, and sustainable infrastructure development.

NEPAL AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Yubak Dangol

Nepal's geographic position between India and China places regional connectivity at the centre of its economic and development prospects. As a landlocked country, Nepal depends heavily on cross-border transport, transit facilities, and regional cooperation to access international markets. Compared to many other landlocked countries in South Asia, Nepal has relatively better connectivity through road, rail, and air links, particularly with India, which serves as its primary trade partner and transit country. In recent years, regional initiatives and bilateral agreements have expanded opportunities for improving transport infrastructure, reducing trade costs, and facilitating the movement of goods and services. At the same time, Nepal has been investing in connectivity-related infrastructure in sectors such as transportation, aviation, energy, and communication to strengthen its integration into the South Asian regional economy. However, limitations related to financial resources, institutional capacity, and geopolitical sensitivities continue to shape the pace and effectiveness of these efforts. This paper examines Nepal's role in regional connectivity within South Asia, focusing on existing transport and trade linkages, ongoing connectivity initiatives, and their implications for economic integration. Using secondary data and a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with enhancing regional connectivity and its potential contribution to Nepal's trade, development, and regional cooperation.

DR. PRABIR DE

Professor, Research and Information
System for Developing Countries (RIS)



Dr. Prabir De is a Professor at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi. He has over three and half decades of full-time research and teaching experiences in India and abroad. He works in the field of international economics and has research interests in international trade and development issues. He has been conducting policy research for the Government of India and several national and international organisations including UN agencies and multilateral development banks. He has been a visiting fellow of the several international organisations including United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). He has contributed several research papers in international journals and written books on trade and development. He is also the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Asian Economic Integration*, published by Sage.

STRENGTHENING REGIONAL TRADE AND INTEGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA: ROLE OF MARITIME CORRIDORS

Prabir De

Global maritime trade continues to face uncertainties and volatilities. South Asia, which depends critically on global maritime trade, has been facing downsides. Some of the notable ones are geopolitical tensions, unpredictability in trade and tariff, supply chain disruptions, rising export control and protection, climate change issues, among others. The path to recovery is still not clear and unpredictable. South Asian countries in general and India in particular have been working in building resilient maritime infrastructure, strengthen trade facilitation, reinforce strategic naval security, and diversify trade corridors beyond traditional choke points. For example, India's unilateral initiatives in cross-border trade facilitation are known to the world. India has made significant stride in trade facilitation. The increasing complexity of the global order today makes it imperative to run and mobilise an effective network of maritime facilities involved in the policy dialogue, which can generate useful documents for policy makers to make informed decisions. A stronger ports and shipping network has become a cornerstone of today's world, essential for addressing unfolding complex challenges. In view of the above, this paper aims to present the current maritime trade profile of the South Asian countries. The paper also presents some of the best practices and lessons that maritime corridors and supply chains offer, and then identifies the gaps, leading to draw implications for the new global order.

Ms. MANDAKINI KAUL

Regional Coordinator for South
Asia World Bank



Ms. Mandakini Kaul is the World Bank's Regional Coordinator for South Asia, bringing over 25 years of experience in international development and economic policy. She works across countries and sectors to design and deliver programs that create jobs, expand economic opportunities, strengthen institutions, and make growth more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. Committed to advancing gender equality, Ms. Kaul has been a strong advocate for placing women and girls at the centre of development. She has helped integrate gender perspective into sectors where they have traditionally been overlooked, ensuring that policies and investments translate into tangible benefits for women, families, and communities.

In her current role, she leads strategic programs and partnerships with development partner, civil society, the private sector, and governments that foster collaboration, innovation, and knowledge sharing across South Asia. Her work focuses on driving results that improve lives create jobs, and promote a more equitable and sustainable future for all. Ms. Kaul previously led the World Bank's programs in Bihar and Rajasthan and contributed to key institutional strategies. She has authored several World Bank publications, including the Good Neighbours series, the World Bank's Approach to South Asia Regional Integration, Cooperation, and Engagement, and the India Systematic Country Diagnostic. She holds degrees in Economics from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, and the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

PORTS, BORDERS, AND INVESTMENT: INTEGRATING FINANCE, ADVISORY, AND PRIVATE PARTICIPATION

Mandakini Kaul

Efficient maritime ports and land border crossings shape trade costs, reliability, and firm location decisions. In many developing regions, these gateways remain fragmented, operationally weak, and fiscally constrained. Closing the gap requires more than new infrastructure – it depends on institutional reform, predictable regulation, and coordinated corridor management.

Combining finance with technical and policy support can help governments modernise customs procedures, deploy interoperable digital systems, and improve operational accountability. At the same time, well-structured concessions, risk-mitigation tools, and regulatory strengthening can attract commercial operators and shift investment toward performance-based service delivery rather than publicly funded capacity expansion. Integrated approaches that align advisory work, public finance, and private investment offer a practical pathway to modernising maritime and land ports while sustaining long-term investment.

MR. MAIWAND SAFI

Researcher,
South Asian University



Mr. Maiwand Safi completed his Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Delhi and earned his Master's degree in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). His doctoral research focuses on Indian and Chinese connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan, with particular attention to how narratives, perceptions, and local agency shape regional engagement. His work engages critically with themes of connectivity, the Global South, Afghan narratives, and the role of regional powers in shaping political and economic order. He has written extensively on Afghanistan's regional positioning and its interactions with India, China, and neighbouring states. He has presented his work at national and international academic forums and continues to contribute to scholarly and policy debates on connectivity, regional integration, and evolving geopolitical dynamics in Asia.

THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF AFGHANISTAN IN INDIA'S MAHASAGAR VISION

Maiwand Safi

India's MAHASAGAR is a comprehensive initiative aimed at advancing India's Global South Strategy. Despite Afghanistan's crucial location at the crossroads of South Asia and Central Asia, it is not sufficiently remapped in MAHASAGAR. The omission is significant, as Afghanistan plays a critical role in India's ambitious connectivity initiatives across Eurasia. The Chabahar-Herat corridor links the Arabian Sea with Central Asian markets. At the same time, the most direct rail routes from India to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan pass through Afghan territory via Iran, making Afghanistan indispensable to regional connectivity. Excluding Afghanistan from MAHASAGAR risks weakening the coherence and effectiveness of India's regional strategy.

Afghanistan offers a critical strategic route for India to bypass Pakistan, connecting it to Central Asia. Chabahar remains India's most viable access point to Central Asia and aligns closely with MAHASAGAR's objective of promoting integrated connectivity and infrastructure development. Beyond geography, Afghanistan also presents long-term economic opportunities and an emerging market for Indian trade. This paper, drawing on Afghan narratives, argues that India is widely viewed positively, as it is seen as a benevolent partner through Indian-funded projects that are locally driven, unlike China's more state-centric and extractive approaches. Positioning Afghanistan within the MAHASAGAR would enhance India's soft power, legitimacy, and strategic narrative as a benevolent partner. These perceptions significantly shape the sustainability of connectivity initiatives on the ground.

Additionally, including Afghanistan within MAHASAGAR enables India to counterbalance China's regional influence and restricts Pakistan's strategic space, particularly in light of the evolving regional geopolitics. Neglecting Afghanistan would result in MAHASAGAR being isolated from Central Asia, creating an opportunity for Pakistan and China to expand their influence. China has specifically launched its geopolitical strategy of connectivity, recognising Afghanistan as a

vital element. Integrating Afghanistan into India's extensive connectivity initiative, while respecting Afghan agency, priorities, and needs, not only strengthens India's leadership in realising the MAHASAGAR doctrine but also has the potential to transform Afghanistan from a borderland into a true partner of India. Therefore, incorporating Afghanistan strategically and narratively into MAHASAGAR would help India achieve its broader objectives in the region.

Chair

AMB. RAJIV BHATIA

Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Studies
Programme, Gateway House



Amb. Rajiv Bhatia is Distinguished Fellow, Foreign Studies Programme at Gateway House. He is a member of CII's International Advisory Council, Trade Policy Council and Africa Committee. He is the Chair of FICCI's Task Force on Blue Economy, and served as Chair of Core Group of Experts on BIMSTEC. He is a founding member of the Kalinga International Foundation and a member of the governing council of Asian Confluence. As Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) from 2012-15, he played a key role in strengthening India's Track-II research and outreach activities. During a 37-year innings in the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), he served as Ambassador to Myanmar and Mexico and as High Commissioner to Kenya, South Africa and Lesotho. He dealt with a part of South Asia, while posted as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs. A prolific columnist, he is also a regular speaker on foreign policy and diplomacy in India and abroad. He was Senior Visiting Research Fellow during 2011-13 at the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. He holds a master's degree in political science from Allahabad University. His first book *India in Global Affairs: Perspectives from Sapru House* (KW Publishers, 2015) presented a sober and insightful view of India's contemporary foreign policy. His second book, *India-Myanmar Relations: Changing contours* (Routledge 2016) received critical acclaim. His third book, *India-Africa Relations: Changing Horizons* (Routledge 2022) has also been receiving positive reviews.

**REAR ADMIRAL Y. N. JAYARATHNA,
RWP*, RSP, USP, NDU, PSC**

Former Chief Hydrographer,
International Consultant



Rear Admiral Y. N. Jayarathna retired from the Sri Lanka Navy in 2022 on reaching mandatory retirement age of 55 after an illustrious, battle decorated and unblemished career span of over 35 years. At the time of his retirement, he was the Chief of Staff and the Chief Hydrographer of the Navy, concurrently holding the appointment of the Joint Chief Hydrographer to the Government. On retirement his expertise was secured by the United Nations and is an International Consultant to the UNODC on Undersea Cables and Maritime Intelligence. He holds two Master's Degrees from the University of Kelaniya for Defence Studies (2001) and University of Goa, India for Hydrographic Surveys (2003). He is International Hydrographic Organisation's Category 'A' Qualified Hydrographer with vast knowledge and experience on oceanic and maritime matters. He has authored several articles for publications on topics covering geopolitics to marine science research and is a regular visiting lecturer for the think tanks, Staff Colleges, and the National Defence College. He speaks widely on contemporary geo-strategic maritime issues and the oceans and regularly write to printed media and think tanks on matters maritime. Please follow his profile in LinkedIn for his presentations, writings, and newsletters.

SAGAR TO MAHASAGAR: A CONCEPT IN NEED OF PERPETUAL CHANGES

Y. N. Jayarathna

SAGAR (2015) and MAHASAGAR (2025) concepts today need to be interpolated by the small island State such as Sri Lanka, with concepts developed by other regional and extra-regional players of the Indian Ocean. For Sri Lanka this compels a deep theoretical study and apply with practical realities/aspects on ground. The above concepts, developed for economic prosperity in focus, necessitate the safety and security of the primary mode of economic connectivity over the oceans. Thus, ports, harbours, sea lanes, and maritime domain awareness takes higher precedence than before in making informed decisions.

For the Indian Ocean Region, this matters as the economic empowerment has shifted to the global south. Two countries that lead this transformation; India and China because of their population strengths needs to be acknowledged and several others such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh with their large population, collectively drives the consumer markets. These consumer-markets characterised by the consumer demand ensure flow of exports and imports. The small island States of the Indian Ocean are also not left behind due to their Purchasing Power, despite small populations. The maritime connectivity through ports and harbours for hinterland developments in Central Asia, Africa and in Southeast Asia presents challenges and opportunities for all stakeholders whilst the State remain responsible for individual home-work to fulfil the economic end-status of the stakeholders. These are going to press the statecraft to be more transparent and adoptive in balancing their domestic aspirations and global obligations. The paper intends to discuss these concepts from Sri Lanka's point of view taking into account the regional and global trends, hotspots, and shocks. The presenter with his regional exposure and with hydrographic background intends to discuss data, statistics, and facts to interpolate and interpret the MAHASAGAR in harnessing development cooperation in the Indian Ocean in particular and in Global-South in whole.

DR. ALY SHAMEEM

Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Social Sciences
of the Faculty of Arts, Maldives National
University



Dr. Aly Shameem, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Science, Faculty of Arts of the Maldives National University. He has a Ph.D. in International Environment and Development Relations from the Global Change Institute of New Zealand and a Master's Degree in Political Science from Dalhousie University, Canada. For his first degree, Dr. Shameem did a double major combining management and politics. Dr. Shameem presently teaches modules on international relations and political science. He previously served as the Head of the Maldives Civil Service. Prior to that, he served as the Deputy Secretary-General of the Maldives Parliament (People's Majlis), and as a Commissioner at the Human Rights Commission of Maldives and the Judicial Services Commission of Maldives.

Dr. Shameem's research specialisation includes the islands' climate diplomacy, the geopolitics of the Maldives, ocean governance, the blue economy of the Maldives and maritime security of South Asia. He was a trained diplomat, serving for 11 years in the Maldives' Foreign Service, including three times covering UN General Assembly sessions. As a delegate of the Maldives, he has attended many conferences of the UN, the Commonwealth, the Non-Aligned Movement, SAARC, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. He is often invited to speak at conferences and prize-day events as an academic researcher, thought leader, and motivational speaker. In 2015, Dr. Shameem received the Maldives National Award of Recognition for his social services, including community education and youth mentoring. In July 2025, Spranger Publishing published a book titled *Decentralisation in South Asia*, co-edited by Dr. Shameem. He has also published several articles in research journals.

PROSPECTS FOR THE MALDIVES FOR IMPROVED SECURITY AND TRADE RELATIONS THROUGH THE VISION OF MAHASAGAR

Aly Shameem

The Maldives, an archipelagic nation strategically positioned in the heart of the Indian Ocean, stands to gain substantially from deeper alignment with India's evolving maritime vision, MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). In the security domain, MAHASAGAR offers the Maldives opportunities to deepen long-standing maritime domain awareness, cooperation with India, including information sharing, joint patrols, capacity-building for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and Coast Guard, and coordinated responses to piracy, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, drug & arms trafficking, human smuggling, and climate-induced maritime threats.

On the trade and economic front, MAHASAGAR can be explored to accelerate the blue economy of the Maldives (marine biotechnology, sustainable fisheries, renewable ocean energy) and sustainable growth, opening diversified, resilient economic engagement. The Maldives can leverage Indian grant assistance, concessional lines of credit, technology transfers, and infrastructure support to reduce over-dependence on a narrow tourism base.

This paper aims to examine the prospective benefits for the Maldives in two core domains: enhanced maritime and non-traditional security and strengthened bilateral and regional trade/economic relations, both enabled through participation in the MAHASAGAR vision. This study will adopt a qualitative approach, primarily by reviewing secondary sources for data collection and using thematic content analysis to generate findings. Finally, the paper will outline the best strategy for the Maldives to optimise opportunities arising from MAHASAGAR.

DR. MALSHINI SENARATNE

Lecturer, University of Seychelles and
Director, Eco-Sol Consulting



Dr. Malshini Senaratne is the Assistant Head of Department / Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Business and Sustainable Development at the University of Seychelles, and a Director at Eco Sol Consulting Ltd. With a background in development studies, international business and economics, her research trajectory has naturally gravitated toward the Blue Economy framework, particularly as it evolves within the Seychelles context. She has collaborated with cross-disciplinary teams to advance research around the Seychelles Blue Economy, particularly within the entrepreneurial, education, and climate resilience sector. Her work is also driven by a particular interest in how small states navigate complex geopolitical dynamics and design innovative policy pathways that support equitable development across the region. Malshini is committed to fostering constructive dialogue between policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors. She believes that inclusive engagement is essential to shaping resilient and future-ready island societies.

SMALL STATES WITH BIG OCEANS: SEYCHELLES' BLUE ECONOMY MODEL AS A DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING MAHASAGAR COOPERATION

Malshini Senaratne

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean are often positioned as strategic beneficiaries of development assistance or maritime security support. However, the Republic of Seychelles demonstrates that small states can also function as policy innovators, particularly in advancing the Blue Economy (BE) model as a holistic development framework. This paper argues that Seychelles' Blue Economy framework, anchored in sustainable ocean governance, marine spatial planning, and climate-resilient financing instruments, provides a scalable and transferable paradigm for broader regional cooperation aligned with India's MAHASAGAR vision of mutual and holistic advancement across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

As one of Seychelles' most valued partners, India has already contributed significantly to strengthening Seychelles' maritime capabilities through coastal surveillance systems, hydrographic mapping, and capacity-building programmes. Building on this foundation, the paper explores new areas for strategic collaboration that align Seychelles' Blue Economy priorities with the objectives of MAHASAGAR for Southeast Asia and the rest of Africa. These include shared ocean research and data platforms, expanded blue financing mechanisms, and jointly designed climate-resilient development initiatives. In doing so, the paper seeks to shift the narrative and advance a cooperative economic development model rooted in meaningful partnerships in this extended neighbourhood.

DR. HIACINTER BURCHARD RWECHUNGURA

Lecturer, Dept. of Transport and Nautical Sciences, Dares Salaam Maritime Institute



Dr. Hiacinter Burchard Rwechungura is a distinguished maritime law expert and academic with over 22 years of experience. A Lecturer at the Dar es Salaam Maritime Institute (DMI), she is a leading authority on the legal regimes governing maritime security and the Blue Economy. Dr. Rwechungura holds an impressive academic portfolio, including a Ph.D. in Maritime Safety and Security from the Open University of Tanzania (2023), an M.Sc. in Maritime Affairs (Law and Policy) from the World Maritime University in Sweden, and postgraduate credentials in Ocean Governance and Security from the University of Wollongong, Australia. She earned her Bachelor of Laws (LLB) from Tumaini University and is a Certified Advocate, Notary Public, and Commissioner for Oaths.

CONSOLIDATING MARITIME PARTNERSHIPS: INDIA AND TANZANIA AS DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Hiacinter Burchard Rwechungura

In the contemporary era of the “Indo-Pacific” and the burgeoning Blue Economy, maritime cooperation has transitioned from a peripheral concern to a central pillar of South-South cooperation. This paper examines the evolving maritime partnership between India and Tanzania, positioning it as a microcosm of broader Global South solidarity. As the WIO faces complex traditional and non-traditional security threats namely the 2024–2025 resurgence of Somali-based piracy, the impact of Houthi-related disruptions in the Red Sea, and IUU fishing, the demand for robust bilateral and multilateral frameworks has intensified. The paper analyses the synergy between India’s SAGAR and MAHASAGAR initiatives and Tanzania’s National Blue Economy Strategy. It argues that the partnership has moved beyond traditional “donor-recipient” dynamics into a strategic collaboration focused on MDA, joint naval exercises like AIKEYME, and hydrographic surveying. Critical gaps in the current security architecture of the Global South, namely jurisdictional limitations and resource constraints in littoral states, are equally identified. Finally, the paper proposes a roadmap for enhanced engagement emphasising “development-led security,” including port digitalisation, community-led coastal resilience, and a shared “Information Fusion” framework. By consolidating their maritime interests, India and Tanzania can safeguard economic lifelines via a scalable governance model that avoids Great Power rivalry and strengthens the collective voice of the Global South.

DR. ABHISHEK MISHRA

Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA



Dr. Abhishek Mishra is an Associate Fellow with the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. His research focuses on India and China's engagement in Africa, aimed at developing partnerships under the framework of South-South cooperation, including a specific focus on maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region. Abhishek holds a Ph.D. in African Studies from the Department of African Studies, University of Delhi. His Ph.D. thesis is titled "India's Maritime Cooperation with African Countries in Western Indian Ocean Region." Abhishek has given a lecture at Naval War College, Goa for the Naval Higher Commander Course on the theme "West IOR Island Nations and East Africa: Politico-Economic Perspective." He has also participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), sponsored by the United States Department of State on the theme "Enhancing Regional Maritime Governance and Cooperation in the QUAD" in October, 2022. He also participated in the Paris Defence Young Leaders programme from 12-16 June 2023, hosted by the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM), a research institute of the French Ministry of Armed Forces. Before joining MP-IDSA, Abhishek was working on African issues at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

RESILIENCE, ENERGY AND MARITIME SECURITY IN MOZAMBIQUE: ASSESSING INDIA'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING MOZAMBIQUE'S DEVELOPMENT

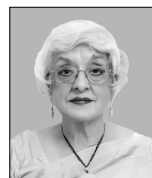
Abhishek Mishra

Mozambique and India celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations in 2025. Mozambique's strategic location sitting astride the Mozambique Channel, its resource-rich waters containing offshore gas reserves, makes Maputo an important Indo-Pacific partner for India. Indian firms like ONGC Videsh have made USD 20 billion investments in the hope of transforming the nation into a top-tier liquified natural gas. Supporting maritime security by regularly gifting patrol vessels like fast interceptor crafts, conducting trilateral maritime exercises (India-Mozambique-Tanzania IMT-TRILAT), donating infantry weapons training simulators, and extending lines of credit to procure 'Made in India' defence equipments, rural electrification and infrastructure development is a regular feature of India's bilateral engagement with Mozambique. In February 2026, Mozambique launched new digital e-Visa system for Indian travellers and signed a mutual legal assistance treaty in criminal matters. While bilateral relations are progressing well, tropical floods and cyclones continue to ravage the nation. The Indian Navy has played valued humanitarian role as the 'first responder' in providing HADR assistance. With Mozambique participating in Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), International Fleet Review (IFR), MILAN Exercise, AIKEYME Exercise, IOS-SAGAR, all aimed at advancing regional maritime security, this paper analyses how India through the MAHASAGAR framework can provide a distinct and compelling partnership model for supporting Mozambique's developmental needs.

Chair

AMB. VEENA SIKRI

Former High Commissioner of India
to Bangladesh



Amb. Veena Sikri's career and experience straddle the worlds of academia and diplomacy. She has served for 37 years (1971-2008) as a career diplomat with the Indian Foreign Service, including as High Commissioner to Bangladesh (2003-06) and to Malaysia (2000-03), as Consul General in Hong Kong (1996-2000), and Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi (1989-92). She has held challenging and prestigious assignments at the Indian Embassies in Moscow, Kathmandu, Paris, and at the Permanent Mission of India to the UN in New York (1977-81), where she represented India in the UN Security Council, ECOSOC, and at Summit meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). After retiring from the Indian Foreign Service, Veena Sikri joined academia as Professor, holding the Ford Foundation endowed Chair, Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, from February 2009 to October 2013. She was concurrently Visiting Senior Research Fellow with the Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore (November 2008 to October 2011). Her research work at ISEAS resulted in a book on Malaysia-India relations.

Amb. Veena Sikri is the Founding Trustee and Convener of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN). While at Jamia Millia Islamia, Amb. Veena Sikri conceptualised and created this organisation, which was launched in March 2009. With its unique focus on women's empowerment as the key to sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability in South Asia, SWAN brings together women leaders from nine South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Two flagship projects that SWAN is currently working on are on "Women for Change : Building a Gendered Media in South Asia" (two volume Report on Status of Women in Media in

South Asia released in March 2020, with preparations now underway for the second phase of this project), and “The Rural Tourism based Social Enterprise Project for Sustainable Development and Women’s Empowerment in South Asia”, with the focus on empowering rural women through digital technology enabled upskilling in activities and sectors they are already familiar with in their daily lives. Towards this end, SWAN has successfully co-organised two impactful Conferences on Women’s Economic Empowerment in Rural South Asia, held respectively in Kathmandu (May 2024) and Thimphu (May 2025).

As Chairperson of ICCR’s Performance Audit Committee, Amb. Veena Sikri submitted, in December 2016, her Report on “India’s Soft Power Projection Through Cultural Diplomacy”. She has served as member of ICCR’s General Assembly (2016-19), and Chairperson of ICCR’s Finance Committee (2016-19). With effect from August 2025, Amb. Veena Sikri has been appointed Honorary Visiting Professor at the South Asian University, New Delhi. Her publications include “India & Malaysia: Intertwined Strands” (2013), published by ISEAS, Singapore, and Manohar, New Delhi; and the volume co-edited by her (together with Professor Muchkund Dubey and Professor Imtiaz Ahmed) on “Contemporarising Tagore and the World” (UPL, Dhaka, 2013). She is currently working on a book titled “The Geopolitics of Bangladesh”.

AMB. K. NANDINI SINGLA

Director General, Indian Council for
Cultural Relations (ICCR)



Amb. K. Nandini Singla, an Indian career diplomat of 28 years, is the Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in New Delhi. Before this, she served as High Commissioner to Mauritius; Ambassador to Portugal; Head of the Europe (West) Division and Director (USA & Canada); Counsellor in the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in Geneva; First Secretary in the Indian High Commission in Bangladesh; Under Secretary (United Nations) in the Ministry; and Second Secretary in the Indian Embassy in Paris.

Amb. Singla is a fellow of ASPEN and the Ananta Aspen India Leadership Initiative (now known as the Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellowship). She is also an alumni of the Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University. She won the Prime Minister's Silver Medal as "All India Best NCC Cadet" in 1990 and represented India in the NCC Youth Exchange Programme with Canada. She holds a Master's degree in Political Science and M.Phil. in Diplomatic Studies. She speaks Kannada, Hindi, English and French.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

K. Nandini Singla

Cultural Diplomacy will play a key role globally as cultural rebalancing accompanies the ongoing economic and political rebalancing in the world. For a 'cultural superpower' like India, cultural diplomacy will be a key facilitator in India's journey towards Viksit Bharat and India's rise in the world. India's unmatched soft power will not only help revive historical linkages with partner countries, especially in India's extended neighbourhood, but also carry India's civilisational message of being a benevolent force for the greater good. In this, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) will play an instrumental role as the cultural diplomacy arm of the Government of India. A new 'Brand India' that positions India as a leading global cultural brand, will involve many different facets – showcasing various aspects of Indian civilisation beyond music, art and dance; vibrant cultural exchanges with the world; teaching Indian music, dance, Yoga and languages abroad; enhancing the 4000 scholarships being given currently to foreign students; setting up more 'India Chairs' in foreign universities; greater intellectual dialogue and collaboration; expanding ICCR's Foreign Visitors Programmes; organising signature marquee events; and evolving a network of robust partnerships with a range of stakeholders in India and abroad, including the Indian diaspora.

DR. SANDAGOMI COPERAHEWA

Professor & Head, Department of
Sinhala, University of Colombo



Dr. Sandagomi Coperahewa is Chair Professor of Sinhala in the Department of Sinhala, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. He graduated from the University of Colombo with a BA (First Class Honours) in Sinhala and obtained an M.A. in Language Studies from Lancaster University, UK, under a Commonwealth Academic Staff Scholarship. He earned an M.Phil. in Sinhala from the University of Peradeniya and completed a Ph.D. in South Asian Studies at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, UK.

A linguist by training, Professor Coperahewa has published extensively in both Sinhala and English on the Sinhala language and language planning in Sri Lanka. His primary research focuses on modern Sinhala usage, the sociology of the Sinhala language, and language policy and planning. In addition to his main research interests, as the Founding Director of the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS) at the University of Colombo, he has actively contributed to a range of research and collaborative projects related to Rabindranath Tagore and contemporary India.

BEYOND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES: TAGORE'S VISION OF INDIA-SRI LANKA CULTURAL DIALOGUE

Sandagomi Coperahewa

Cultural relations between India and Sri Lanka date back a long time and the two countries have maintained strong relations over thousands of years. In the 20th century, among the foreign individuals who exerted an influence on Sri Lankan arts and culture, the greatest was Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore is fondly referred by a wide spectrum of Sri Lankan society, as a cultural figure who has had a profound influence on 'cultural renaissance' of modern Sri Lanka. The reverence accorded to Tagore in Sri Lanka is a reflection of his abiding legacy in the region as a whole. It is also a manifestation of the common cultural space that binds two countries together. Among the many aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's diverse personality was his fascination for travel and interaction with other personalities. During his travels, Tagore explained his ideal of *Visva-Bharati* and continued with his dream of establishing contacts between different cultures and people. Long before formal diplomatic relations were established, Tagore envisioned a form of engagement grounded in shared civilisational values, humanism, and artistic exchange.

Focusing on Tagore's most well-known visits to Sri Lanka, 1922, 1928 and 1934, this paper explores his role as a pioneer of cultural diplomacy in a neighbouring country in South Asia. By examining the ways in which he interacted with the cultural personalities of that era, this paper revisits Tagore's legacy in Sri Lankan cultural and intellectual life and how he created new pathways for cultural understanding beyond colonial and political frameworks. In general, this paper provides insights to understand the socio-political background of Tagore's influence on Sri Lankan thinkers, educators, and artists, showing how cultural diplomacy preceded formal diplomatic relations. In tracing these interactions, the paper highlights how Tagore's vision continues to offer insights into contemporary efforts at reconnecting histories and fostering cultural dialogue between India and Sri Lanka.

DR. NILOY RANJAN BISWAS

Professor, Dept. of International
Relations, Dhaka University



Dr. Niloy Ranjan Biswas is Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka. He received his Ph.D. in International Politics from City, University of London, and was a Fulbright Fellow at George Washington University, where he earned a Master's in Security Policy Studies. He completed a USIP Resolve Fellowship on community policing and preventing violent extremism and served as country lead for a multi-year study on women in peace operations with the Government of Bangladesh. Dr. Biswas has co-authored and edited several books and published extensively on security governance, violent extremism, forced migration, WPS, and South Asian contributions to UN peacekeeping.

RECONNECTING HISTORY: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, MAHASAGAR, AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH REIMAGINED FROM SOUTH ASIA

Niloy Ranjan Biswas

South Asia occupies a central yet under-utilised position in the historical, cultural, and maritime networks of the Global South. For centuries, the region was connected through trade routes, religious circulation, intellectual exchanges, and shared civilisational spaces linking the Indian Ocean littoral, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. However, colonial disruptions, post-colonial state formation, and persistent geopolitical rivalries have fragmented these historical linkages, leaving South Asia institutionally divided and culturally underleveraged despite its shared past. This paper argues that cultural diplomacy – grounded in historical consciousness – can serve as a critical enabler for reimagining South Asia’s regional role within India’s evolving strategic framework from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR. While SAGAR emphasised maritime security and economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, MAHASAGAR expands this vision by embedding South Asia within a broader Global South architecture that prioritises mutual growth, inclusivity, and human-centric development. The paper examines how reconnecting historical and cultural ties can complement MAHASAGAR’s strategic objectives by fostering trust, people-to-people connectivity, and normative convergence across South Asia and its extended neighbourhood. Focusing on South Asia as both a cultural core and strategic bridge, the paper explores pathways through which shared heritage – religious networks, maritime histories, linguistic affinities, and post-colonial solidarities – can be mobilised to strengthen regional cooperation beyond the limitations of existing institutional frameworks such as SAARC. It contends that cultural diplomacy offers South Asian states an opportunity to exercise collective agency within the Global South, counter external dominance, and shape a cooperative regional order rooted in historical continuity rather than strategic rivalry alone. Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis of pre- and post-colonial cultural networks with policy analysis of contemporary regional frameworks such as SAGAR, MAHASAGAR, SAARC, and BIMSTEC.

It also draws on case studies from other South Asian countries to illustrate how cultural diplomacy can be operationalised as a strategic tool within South Asia's evolving regional architecture. The paper concludes by proposing policy-relevant mechanisms – including South Asian cultural corridors, maritime heritage diplomacy, academic and civil society networks, and Track 1.5 dialogues – that can operationalise cultural diplomacy within the MAHASAGAR framework. By reconnecting history with contemporary strategy, the paper positions South Asia not as a peripheral sub-region but as a foundational pillar in the evolving Global South partnership architecture.

DR. GAURAV BHATTARAI

Assistant Professor, Dept. of
International Relations, Tribhuvan
University



Dr. Gaurav Bhattarai is an Assistant Professor of International Relations and Diplomacy at Tribhuvan University in Nepal. He teaches Small States in International Relations and International and Regional Organisations to post-graduate students at Tribhuvan University. He also delivers lectures at the Army Command and Staff College of the Nepal Army, War College, and Armed Police Force Command and Staff College. He leads the discipline of border security at the Armed Police Force Academy in Matatirtha, Kathmandu.

His expertise includes India Studies, Sino-Indian interactions, Small States in South Asia, borderlands in South Asia, and Critical Security. He has published in different international journals, including *International Politics*, *Cambridge Journal of China Studies*, *Stosunki Międzynarodowe-International Relations*, *Millennial Asia*, *Geopolitics Quarterly*, *Vestnik RUDN*, among others.

He has presented his academic papers at international and regional conferences in Australia, China, India, and Bhutan. He regularly contributes to leading dailies and policy platforms across Kathmandu, South Korea, and the UK, including *Republica*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *Record Nepal*, *Annapurna Express*, *Global Asia*, *ORF*, and *IR Info*. His book *Nepal between China and India: Difficulty of Being Neutral* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022, followed by *Nepal's Power Elites: Rajahs, Ranas and Republic* in June 2025. He has conducted extensive fieldwork and ethnographic research in Nepal's border regions with India and China for his forthcoming book, scheduled for 2026.

FROM HIMALAYA TO MAHASAGAR: MAKING SENSE OF NEPAL'S CULTURAL TIES WITH INDIA THROUGH TRANSIT ACCESS, AND OPEN BORDERS

Gaurav Bhattarai

In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India's maritime posture has significantly evolved. The shift from the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) to the Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) reflects not just a change in strategic language but also highlights the needs and economic aspirations of India. While the MAHASAGAR initiatives aim to go beyond the limits set by established regional organisations like SAARC and BIMSTEC by creating new opportunities for India's neighbours, this study seeks to identify how landlocked Nepal, having open borders, historical and cultural ties with India, and access to Indian seaports, can benefit from these initiatives. It emphasises three points: first, the importance of India's maritime ambitions for Nepal; second, the security and geopolitical challenges faced by Indian initiatives in the broader Indo-Pacific region; and third, whether Nepal's non-aligned strategy remains effective in navigating great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region. By placing Nepali perspectives within the larger regional security framework, this study shows how India's maritime strategies in the IOR influence trade routes, energy flows, and global supply chains – upon which Nepal depends heavily through India – while also shaping Nepal-India cultural relations within this interconnected regional landscape.

DR. ASHOK BEHURIA

Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA



Dr. Ashok Behuria is a Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the South Asia Centre at MP-IDSA. He is a Ph.D. in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India and worked on “India-Pakistan Relationship during the Eighties” for his Ph.D. He joined IDSA in 2003 and before that he was working as Assistant Director at International Centre for Peace Studies (ICPS), New Delhi. He has also been Editor of *International Studies*, the prestigious journal from JNU and has been in the Editorial Boards of *Journal of Peace Studies* and *Strategic Analysis*, the flagship journal from MP-IDSA. He has taught at University of Delhi and Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. A close observer of developments in the South Asia, he has been awarded the prestigious K. Subrahmanyam Award for excellence in strategic studies for his work on Pakistan in 2009. He has published research articles on strategic issues related to Pakistan, India-Pakistan relations, Sri Lanka, Nepal and South Asian security environment in Indian and foreign journals and edited books on South Asia. His latest book *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: Origin, Evolution & Future Portents* is available on MP-IDSA website for download and on Amazon and Flipkart for purchase.

DHARMA DIPLOMACY: RECLAIMING THE MANDALA IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

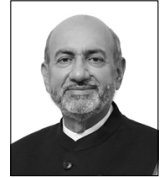
Ashok Behuria

In the shifting geopolitical landscape of 2026, India has increasingly pivoted toward 'Dharma Diplomacy'-the strategic integration of Buddhist heritage into its foreign policy architecture. This paper will examine how India leverages its status as the Land of the Buddha to consolidate its 'Act East' and 'Neighbourhood First' objectives. While traditionally viewed through the lens of cultural soft power, this study argues that Buddhist diplomacy now serves as a robust 'soft-power tool' vis-à-vis China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. By analysing recent high-profile relic expositions (state-sponsored events where sacred remains of the Buddha or his eminent disciples are loaned to other countries for public viewing and veneration), the revitalisation of Nalanda University, and the development of the trans-border Buddhist Circuit, the paper will evaluate the efficacy of faith-based engagement in fostering regional stability. Furthermore, it would explore if there is any tension between India's secular democratic identity and its role as a spiritual 'Vishwa Guru'. The main hypothesis is that for India to successfully reclaim the 'Mandala' of Asian influence, it must bridge the gap between historical symbolism and modern infrastructure. As the 'Himalayan Chessboard' grows more complex, Buddhism offers India a unique civilisational currency that transcends trade and military might, positioning New Delhi as the central node of a values-based Asian order.

Chair

PROF. SANJAY CHATURVEDI

Vice President & Dean, Faculty of
International Studies (FIS), South Asian
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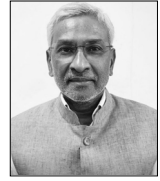
Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi is Vice President of South Asian University, Dean of the Faculty of International Studies, and Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies. He is President of the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG), an Observer to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Chief Editor of the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* (Routledge). He served as Lead Author for the Asia chapter (Chapter 10) of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (Working Group II, 2019-2021).

Prof. Chaturvedi pursued post-doctoral research at the University of Cambridge with a Nehru Centenary British Commonwealth Fellowship and later held a Leverhulme Research Grant at the Scott Polar Research Institute. His book *The Polar Regions: A Political Geography* (John Wiley, 1996) remains widely cited. He has authored, co-authored, and edited numerous books with Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, Routledge, Wiley, and Sage.

He has served on editorial boards of leading journals and has been a member of the Indian delegation to multiple Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings.

MR. DAMMU RAVI

Former Secretary (Economic Relations),
Ministry of External Affairs



Mr. Dammu Ravi retired as Secretary (Economic Relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs in August 2025. He joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1989 and did postings in Indian missions in Mexico, Cuba and Brussels in the 1990s. At Headquarters, in his capacity as Director (2002-2005), he handled India's relations with West European countries, EU and UN issues relating to Development, Environment and Climate Change. As Joint Secretary for Latin America and Caribbean countries (2009-2013), he worked to deepen India's engagement with the region.

During his deputation to the Department of Commerce (2014-2020), Mr. Ravi handled India's trade policy and World Trade Organisation (WTO) issues and was a lead negotiator for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). As Additional Secretary in 2020-21 he was appointed the Chief Coordinator for Covid-19 during lockdown, during which he coordinated disbursement of medicines, medical equipment and evacuation of Indians abroad through Vande Bharat flights. As Secretary (Economic Relations) in the Ministry of External Affairs from Aug 2021-Aug 2025, Mr. Ravi handled mostly geo-economics issues related to India's strategic objectives through Development Assistance to countries in the Global South, partnership with Africa, Multilateral Economic Relations, and New and Emerging Strategic Technologies. He was India's Sherpa for BRICS, G7, IBSA, 12U2. Mr. Ravi has published several research papers on trade, investment, economic cooperation and integration. He regularly does book reviews for various dailies/magazines.

NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY ISSUES

Dammu Ravi

The concept of national security has assumed a wider connotation of late, beyond the military dimension. It is increasingly being defined more widely in terms of financial stability, food, health, water, energy, technology, terrorism by non-state actors, organised crime, etc.

These are socio-economic development issues seen through the lens of national security and goes beyond the military and defence doctrine. These non-traditional security issues appear interconnected in a broader perspective of national security. For example, climate change is linked to the availability of food and water, while economic distress results in migration and poverty. These failures have a massive impact on populations, communities, and individuals. Therefore, the underlying principle is 'inclusivity' in dealing with the multidimensional aspect of national security.

This understanding is nothing new seen through a non-western lens. It is implicit in the classical writings of Kautilya's Arthashastra in 4th century BC that advocates the importance of good governance or dharma as part of the statecraft. Such a thinking draws sustenance from the civilisational and cultural consciousness of a nation.

Thus in dealing with national security in the 21st century a holistic approach involving all arms of the government, including at the state level, is imperative. More importantly it requires re-orientation of the mind-set to integrate strategies for dealing with a world that is complex and in a state of flux.

DR. CHIDO MUTANGADURA-YESWA

Policy Research & Advocacy Lead, Africa
Innovation and Research Centre, Nelson
Mandela University



Dr. Chido Mutangadura-Yeswa is a peace and conflict expert whose work focuses on human security developments in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on security sector reform, climate security, conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding post-conflict reconstruction and development, governance, regionalism, and foreign policy. Chido is a former Senior Fellow at the United Nations University-Centre for Policy Research where she co-led research under an XCEPT Research Fund award titled *Diversity Among Peacekeepers Who Is Involved in UN Peace Support Operations and How Does It Matter?* Chido, was previously a member of the Interdisciplinary Fellow Group on Sustainable regional peacebuilding at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), University of Ghana, Accra. She holds a Doctorate in Conflict Management from the Nelson Mandela University in South Africa where she specialised in the role of regional organisations in promoting citizen participation in political violence prevention processes in Africa. She is currently the President of Policy, Research & Advocacy Lead at the Africa Innovation and Research Centre in Nairobi Kenya.

TOWARDS A SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION FRAMEWORK ON CLIMATE SENSITIVE SECURITY GOVERNANCE

Chido Mutangadura-Yeswa

Countries in the Global South display disproportionately high levels of climate vulnerability despite the continent's low carbon footprint and low contributions to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The Global South's high climate vulnerability increases the risk of climate related insecurity. Climate insecurity, a key emerging threat, refers to the impacts of the climate crisis on peace and security, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The increasingly dire consequences of the climate change-conflict nexus highlights the need for Global South states to reform their security institutions to mitigate and address climate insecurity. Since human security issues have shifted due to climate change, security sector reform (SSR) programs must evolve to adapt security institutions to address climate insecurity.

Multilateral cooperation is critical to reform security sector governance to mitigate and address climate insecurity. While SSR is a national process, it is a resource intensive process requiring significant financial resources and technical expertise. Hence multilateral institutions like the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), African Union (AU) and other bilateral partners have been at the forefront of supporting SSR processes. However, the past decade has been marked by the retreat of multilateral cooperation and the reduction of international aid packages. South-south cooperation (SSC) provides a framework for political, developmental, security and technical collaboration between countries in the Global South. This paper argues that African and Asian countries must leverage SSC to collaborate on security governance to address climate insecurity.

MR. UGYEN DORJI

Assistant Professor, Royal University of
Bhutan



Mr. Ugyen Dorji is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Centre for Environment and Climate Research at the College of Natural Resources, Royal University of Bhutan. A freshwater ecologist by profession, he has a specialisation in Freshwater and Wetland Management. His work focuses on the conservation of freshwater ecosystems, aquatic biodiversity, and the integration of science into environmental policy and management. Over the past decade, he has led and contributed to more than 30 national and international research and consultancy projects related to hydropower, climate change, and river ecology, authored more than 60 research articles in the field of freshwater ecology, and facilitated more than 70 capacity building trainings. He also serves as an editor for the *Bhutan Journal of Natural Resources and Development* and is a co-founder of Water Research Bhutan. His leadership and commitment to environmental stewardship continue to inspire young researchers and strengthen Bhutan's pursuit of sustainable water governance.

URBAN FRESHWATER SECURITY IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS: BIODIVERSITY DECLINE, MICROPLASTIC POLLUTION, AND BHUTAN'S PATHWAYS FOR RESILIENT RIVER GOVERNANCE

Ugyen Dorji

Rapid urbanisation in Bhutan's capital has profoundly altered the ecological integrity of its freshwater systems, posing emerging non traditional security challenges for the Eastern Himalayan region. This study offers a spatio temporal assessment of macroinvertebrate biodiversity, water quality, and microplastic contamination across 12 stream sites in Thimphu during pre and post monsoon seasons. Findings reveal sharp ecological gradients driven by sewage inflow, plastic leakage, altered hydrology, and urban runoff. Sensitive taxa such as *Baetis* and *Drunella* declined in degraded reaches, while pollution tolerant groups like *Chironomus* and *Tubifex* dominated microplastic rich and low oxygen sites. Microplastics, particularly films and fibres were widespread, intensifying turbidity, affecting substrate quality, and contributing to shifts in benthic community structure. Seasonal disturbances, including a major flash flood, accelerated habitat scouring and re colonisation dynamics. Drawing from Bhutan's Buddhist environmental ethics, which emphasise interdependence and the sacred value of water, the paper highlights the need for integrated watershed governance rooted in ecological stewardship. Strengthening plastic regulation, restoring riparian buffers, enhancing sewage treatment, and establishing long term biomonitoring are recommended as pathways to safeguard freshwater security. These insights offer regionally relevant lessons for Himalayan and South Asian urban waters facing similar environmental pressures.

MR. KYAW SAW HAN

Independent Researcher



Mr. Kyaw Saw Han is an independent researcher and practitioner specialising in peace, conflict, and security analysis in Myanmar. He is a graduate of the Australian National University (ANU)'s National Security College, where he earned a Master of National Security Policy.

His professional experience includes involvement in multiple research projects with national and international organisations, including Enlighten Myanmar Research Foundation (EMRef), the Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP) in Sweden, the Institute for Strategy & Policy (ISP), the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and other research institutions. His work has supported evidence-based analysis, policy dialogue, and capacity-building initiatives in conflict-affected and politically sensitive environments.

Mr. Kyaw Saw Han has strong experience engaging with diverse security actors and institutions in Myanmar on security sector development, dialogue, and conflict transformation. His research interests focus on Myanmar's Ethnic Armed Organisations, particularly along the Myanmar-China border, as well as inter-ethnic tensions and insurgencies across the country.

COMMON NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Kyaw Saw Han

The 1,643-kilometre India–Myanmar border has become a critical zone for non-traditional security threats, shaped by protracted conflict, weak border governance, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Transnational organised crime along the frontier has intensified in recent years, including insurgent activity, narcotics and arms trafficking, human trafficking, and illicit cross-border trade. The borderlands host both Northeast Indian insurgent groups and multiple Myanmar resistance armed organisations, creating a complex security environment that transcends conventional state-centric responses.

These challenges have been further aggravated by Myanmar’s post-2021 coup developments. The fragmentation of authority, proliferation of armed actors, and militarisation of border areas have enabled criminal networks to operate with greater impunity, while increasingly blurring the distinction between political insurgency and organised crime. Concurrently, Myanmar’s strategic location places it at the centre of geopolitical competition between India and China, with New Delhi’s engagement often viewed through the prism of this rivalry. While Nay Pyi Taw has at times sought to leverage this competition, it also faces heightened risks of instability in sensitive border regions.

This paper analyses the evolving non-traditional security threats along the Indo-Myanmar border and offers policy-relevant recommendations for enhanced bilateral cooperation and adaptive border governance to advance shared security and development objectives.

DR. UTTAM K. SINHA

Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA



Dr. Uttam Kumar Sinha is a leading scholar and commentator on transboundary rivers, climate change and the Arctic. He was Co-Chair of the Think-20 Task Force on 'Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New Pathways to the 2030 Agenda' during India's G20 Presidency. After a brief stint in the print media and a doctoral degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, he joined the MP-IDSA in 2001, where he coordinates the Non-Traditional Security Centre and is the Managing Editor of *Strategic Analysis* published by Routledge, the institute's flagship journal. He is a recipient of many fellowships and leadership programmes including senior fellow at the Prime Ministers Museum and Library (2018-2020); Academic Visitor at the Harvard Kennedy School (2015); Chevening 'Gurukul leadership at the London School of Economics and Political Science (2008) and a visiting fellow at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (2006). His recently published work is *Trial By Water: Indus Basin and India-Pakistan Relations* (Penguin 2025); *BBIN Sub-Region: Perspectives on Climate-water-Energy Nexus* (Pentagon Press, 2023), *Indus Basin Interrupted: A History of Territory and Politics from Alexander to Nehru* (Penguin, 2021). His other works include the *Riverine Neighbourhood: Hydro-politics in South Asia* (Pentagon Press, 2016) and *Climate Change Narratives: Reading the Arctic* (2014). His edited and co-edited volumes include *Modi: Energising a Green Future* (Pentagon, 2023); *Modi: Shaping a Global Order in Flux* (Wisdom Tree, 2023); *MODI 2.0: A Resolve To Secure India* (Pentagon Press, 2021); *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms in India's Foreign Policy* (Wisdom Tree, 2016); *Non-Traditional Security Challenges in Asia: Approaches and Responses* (Routledge, 2015); *Arctic: Commerce, Governance and Policy* (Routledge, 2015) and *Emerging Strategic Trends in Asia* (Pentagon Press, 2015).

INTERDEPENDENT RESOURCES, INTERDEPENDENT RISKS: THE FOOD-ENERGY-WATER NEXUS

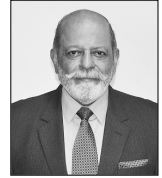
Uttam K. Sinha

South Asia's security landscape is increasingly shaped by non-traditional challenges rooted in resource interdependence. This paper examines the Food-Energy-Water (FEW) nexus as an analytical framework to understand how systemic stresses across these sectors generate compound risks for economic stability, human security, and regional cooperation. Rapid population growth, climate variability, groundwater depletion, energy demand expansion, and agricultural intensification have created feedback loops in which stress in one sector amplifies vulnerabilities in others. Drawing on systems theory and human security perspectives, the paper argues that siloed governance approaches are inadequate to manage these cascading risks. Instead, integrated resource planning, adaptive institutions, and cross-border cooperation are essential to enhance resilience. The study concludes with policy recommendations focused on institutional coordination, climate-responsive infrastructure, demand-side management, and regional data-sharing mechanisms. Reframing resource management through a nexus lens offers South Asia a pathway to mitigate non-traditional security threats while advancing sustainable and inclusive development.

Chair

AMB. SUJAN R. CHINYOY

Director General,
MP-IDSA



Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy is the Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi since 2019. He is a member of the Executive Council of the Society of the Prime Ministers Museum and Library (PMML) and Member, Governing Council, Indian Council of World Affairs. He was a Member of the All-Party MPs Delegation to the UAE and West Africa in the context of OPERATION SINDOOR.

A career diplomat from 1981-2018, he was Ambassador to Japan and Mexico and the Consul General of India in Shanghai and Sydney. A specialist on China and politico-security-military issues, he headed the India-China Diplomatic and Military Expert Group negotiating the confidence-building measures (CBMs) dialogue with China on the boundary dispute from 1996-2000. At the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) from 2008-2012, he handled external and internal security policy issues.

During his public service spanning 45 years, he has dealt with political, security, defence, trade and economic issues. His Foreign Service career included postings at the UN in New York and Saudi Arabia. He was the Chair of the Think20 engagement group for India's G20 Presidency. Amb. Chinoy has chaired the Mid-Term evaluation of the Modernisation Plans (III & IV) for Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs).

He speaks fluent Mandarin and is conversant in Japanese, German, French and Spanish. He is the author of "World Upside Down: India Recalibrates Its Geopolitics" (HarperCollins) and "Global Tumult: India as a Pole Star" (Rupa Publications) and has edited several books on defence, security and IR issues.

DR. JABIN T. JACOB

Associate Professor, Shiv Nadar
University



Dr. Jabin T. Jacob is Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, and Director, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar University. He is a visiting faculty at the Naval War College, Goa and was formerly Fellow and Assistant Director at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi. Jacob's research interests include Chinese domestic politics, Sino-Indian border areas, and Indian and Chinese worldviews.

SAGAR TO MAHASAGAR: CHINA IN THE WAY

Jabin T. Jacob

China's global initiatives are more than about filling infrastructure development gaps in the developing world. They are also about countering dominant Western liberal ideals, undermining them and then entering the resulting vacuum to fill it with a Chinese view of the world. The uniqueness of the Chinese model lies in the use of Chinese material capacities – infrastructure development, their scale and speed of implementation – to promote an argument of the inefficiency and failure of Western liberalism and democracy. It is this performance – and the resulting narrative – that allows Beijing to exploit tensions between the Global South and the Western developed world over political behaviour and norms, and to encourage local ruling elites to align with its interests. What, however, is the Chinese view of the world? What might Pax Sinica look like? This presentation uses examples from China's presence in the South Asian region to argue that a Chinese order, while no less hegemonic than any order it would replace is also going to be different in terms of how it deploys ideology and hierarchy to work around Western (and Indian) presence as well as potential local opposition.

PROF. SHAHAB ENAM KHAN

Executive Director, Bangladesh Center
for Indo-Pacific Affairs, Department of
International Relations, Jahangirnagar
University



Prof. Shahab Enam Khan, Ph.D., teaches International Relations at Jahangirnagar University and serves as the Executive Director of the Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs. His research focuses on conflict mediation, governance of forced migration, and regional security architecture, with recognised expertise in peace processes, political governance in Bangladesh, and strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. Professor Khan earned a Ph.D. in International Energy Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. He has completed Executive Studies at the Harvard Kennedy School in Boston, USA, and obtained an M.A. in International Political Economy from the University of Manchester in the UK. He has also been a Capstone Fellow at the National Defence College in Bangladesh, a Senior Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Delaware in the USA, a Chevening Fellow at the University of Birmingham in the UK, and a Senior Fellow at the Hainan Institute for World Watch in China. Additionally, he co-chairs the South Asia Foresight Network as part of The Millennium Project in the USA.

BEYOND HEDGING AND BALANCING: BANGLADESH'S GEO-ECONOMIC STATECRAFT IN AN ERA OF TRANSACTIONAL MULTIPOLARITY

Shahab Enam Khan

The emergence of the idea of “flexible realism” under the Trump Administration’s 2025 National Security Strategy marks a fundamental shift from post-Cold War liberal internationalism to transactional multipolarity, fundamentally reshaping the strategic landscape for export-dependent peripheral economies. This paper will examine how Bangladesh, positioned at the intersection of competing great-power interests in the Indo-Pacific, must navigate an increasingly complex geo-economic environment marked by supply-chain weaponisation and infrastructure geopolitics. Bangladesh faces an acute “infrastructure trilemma”, maintaining robust economic ties with China, preserving access to Western export markets, and navigating complex political relations within South Asia, while safeguarding strategic autonomy. The traditional balancing strategies that sustained Bangladesh’s development trajectory for three decades are proving inadequate in an era where economic instruments serve as tools of statecraft rather than mutual prosperity. Drawing on theories of geo-economics, weaponised interdependence, and small-state foreign policy, the paper will argue that Bangladesh must transition from reactive balancing to intentional geo-economic statecraft. This would require developing strategic institutional capacity encompassing inter-agency coordination, strategic planning, and adaptive learning processes. Furthermore, the paper will examine critical variables shaping Bangladesh’s positioning in the Indo-Pacific region, including energy transition dependencies, artificial intelligence integration, defence indigenisation, and economic competitiveness—all fundamentally intertwined with the geopolitics of the supply chain. The paper will conclude by arguing that national security cannot be isolated from economic policies to navigate the transformed geo-economic order effectively.

DR. JUVENCE F. RAMASY

Senior Lecturer,
University of Toamasina



Dr. Juvence F. Ramasy is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Toamasina, Madagascar. His research focuses on issues such as the state, elites, the military, the electoral process, democratisation, autocratisation, international relations, and geopolitics in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Indian Ocean region. He is the author of several scientific articles and published 'Le façonnement de l'État en postcolonie indianocéanique. L'hybridité malgache' with Sépia in June 2025.

He has been invited to various universities, including the Institute of Diplomacy of China; African Studies Center of Leiden (Netherlands), Institut d'Études Politiques de Lyon (France); Institut d'Études Politiques de Toulouse (France); Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium); University of Antwerpen (Belgium); University of Mauritius; Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (Paris, France).

He also works as a consultant for national and international organisations in the field of democratic, parliamentary and electoral governance, as well as on military and security issues.

MADAGASCAR FACING GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE GREAT INDIAN OCEAN

Juvence F. Ramasy

In the context of growing regional rivalries between major powers in the Indian Ocean, Madagascar pursues a proactive diplomatic policy. The country implements an all-encompassing diplomatic approach based on Fihavanana (solidarity and unity), the promotion of peace, non-alignment and peaceful neutrality. Madagascar's strategic location in the Indian Ocean and close to the hydrocarbon-rich Mozambique Channel has attracted the attention of regional and extra-regional powers. Added to this is the strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific. As a result, Madagascar has strengthened its collaboration with these powers in a win-win approach. As such, Madagascar and India have concluded cooperation agreements in the areas of security, agriculture and training, among others. Thus, Madagascar and India collaborate in area such as security, agriculture and training. Madagascar also participates in the Raisina dialogues, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the MAHASAGAR (Mutual Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Region). These last two initiatives aim to promote economic prosperity, through increased trade, strategic stability and a cooperative framework. This is in line with Madagascar's foreign policy.

MR. MUHAMMAD WAFFA KHARISMA

Centre for Strategic and International
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Mr. M. Waffa Kharisma is a Researcher at Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia, where he focuses on Indo-Pacific security, ASEAN regionalism, and Indonesian foreign policy. His work examines how middle powers and regional institutions navigate great power competition, economic securitisation, and humanitarian crises. He is also the Managing Editor of CSIS' Indonesian Quarterly and has published widely in academic and policy-oriented outlets, including The Jakarta Post, East Asia Forum, The Diplomat, Asialink, Limes Magazine, and CSIS publications. In addition to his research, he regularly provides analysis and commentary for regional and international media such as Nikkei Asia, South China Morning Post, CNN Indonesia, and Tempo. Mr. Waffa holds an M.Sc. in International Relations from the University of Bristol and a B.Sc. in International Relations from Universitas Indonesia.

DIVERSIFICATION WITHOUT DEPTH: ASEAN-INDIA COOPERATION IN A FRAGMENTED INDO-PACIFIC

Muhammad Waffa Kharisma

Amid intensifying great power rivalry and growing economic securitisation, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a complex strategic space marked by overlapping partnerships, fragmented institutions, and competing development models. This paper examines how regional actors, particularly ASEAN, navigate these geopolitical dynamics through diversification rather than alignment, focusing on ASEAN-India relations as a conduit between sub-regional and cross-regional strategic visions. Building on the convergence between ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), the paper argues that cooperation in the region is increasingly shaped by functional, issue-based collaboration rather than comprehensive institutional integration. While India and ASEAN articulate a shared vision of an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, practical engagement has remained uneven, constrained by intra-ASEAN competition, India's domestic economic priorities, and the relative pull of other major partners. These dynamics underscore the limits of broad regional frameworks and highlight the growing importance of niche-based partnerships. By examining cooperation in areas such as maritime security and connectivity, the paper illustrates how India operates as a middle power partner offering Southeast Asian states strategic diversification without political overreach. At the same time, it highlights tensions between key-country-led initiatives and ASEAN's preference for institutionally embedded mechanisms, raising questions about coherence and sustainability in the evolving regional order.

MR. AMARA THIHA

Non-Resident Fellow, China Program,
Stimson Center



Mr. Amara Thiha is a Non-resident Fellow with the China Program at the Stimson Center. He was the Doctoral Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and Visiting Fellow at International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Prior to this, he was the Research Director at the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security (MIPS) and manages the security dialogues project and China research desk. He was also a Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center in 2017 as the Asia Foundation's William P. Fuller Fellow. Mr. Amara served as Research Manager in the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC), where he supported the institutional establishment. From 2013 to 2016, he worked at the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC), contributing to Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement negotiations, drafting, and the establishment of its implementation bodies.

MYANMAR'S COASTAL FRONTIER AND INDIAN OCEAN SECURITY

Amara Thiha

This presentation examines the changing security dynamics of the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal from Myanmar's perspective. It argues that Myanmar's coastline has become a central strategic frontier due to the convergence of port politics, non-state armed actors, and intensified great-power competition. Two flagship port projects, China's Kyaukphyu and India's Sittwe, remain structurally intact but face declining usability because surrounding territories fall under the effective control of the Arakan Army. This shift demonstrates that strategic infrastructure depends on secure hinterlands rather than formal administrative authority. Local armed groups now exercise bargaining power and increasingly engage external actors, producing a pluralised and hybrid coastal order.

The presentation further shows how non-state actors have transformed the coastline into a functional security space. Maritime drug trafficking, informal military supply routes, emerging piracy risks, and the potential coastal relocation of scam-centre networks indicate a structural reorientation of illicit and conflict-related flows from land to sea. These trends challenge state-centric approaches to maritime security.

Finally, the paper situates Myanmar within a multipolar Indian Ocean environment shaped by China, India, Russia, and the United States. China remains the key stabilising actor, India seeks strategic depth and maritime cooperation, Russia signals interest through potential port engagement, and the United States shapes risk calculations through security and governance frameworks. Myanmar's coastal conflict thus links continental Southeast Asia to evolving Indian Ocean geopolitics.

Chair

AMB. RIVA GANGULY DAS

Former Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs



Amb. Riva Ganguly Das joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986. She is a Postgraduate in Political Science from Delhi University. Amb. Das started her career with a posting in Madrid and went on to do several postings in Europe including to The Hague as Deputy Chief of Mission and as Ambassador to Romania, Albania and Moldova. She has been Consul General in two important financial capitals of the world Shanghai and New York. Amb. Das has handled India's relations with Nepal, Latin America, and the Caribbean, Consular & Passport issues and Public Diplomacy at headquarters. She was also posted as Director General of Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

Amb. Das has extensive experience of multilateral diplomacy and has participated in many environmental negotiations, particularly climate change. As Alternate Permanent Representative of India to the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) at The Hague she has worked on Non-proliferation and disarmament issues.

Amb. Das has done two postings in Dhaka, first from 1999 to 2002 as Counsellor (Press and Information) and Head of the Cultural Centre and later as the High Commissioner. Prior to her retirement in 2021 Amb. Das was Secretary (East) in Ministry of External Affairs.

After retirement, Amb. Das has joined the Governing Council of Asian Confluence a think tank based in Shillong. She is also a Distinguished Fellow at Council for Strategic and Defence Research (CSDR) based in Delhi. She was elected Member of the Advisory Committee of the United Nations Human Rights Council for 2024- 2026 term. Since retirement she is also actively working with educational and community organisations.

VICE ADMIRAL S.N. GHORMADE

Former Vice Chief, Indian Navy and
Secretary General, Colombo Security
Conclave (CSC)



An alumnus of Rashtriya Military School, Bengaluru, National Defence Academy, US Naval Staff College, Rhode Island and Naval War College. 36th Vice Chief of the Navy with an illustrious career spanning over 39 years and significantly contributed towards creating a combat ready, credible, capable, cohesive and future proof Navy through impetus on innovation including Unmanned systems, indigenisation, Maritime including Underwater Domain awareness, Strategic Communication, Synergy, Jointness, integrated planning adopting emerging technologies and financial prudence. Exhibited transformative leadership to bring impactful and sustainable changes while shouldering various challenging responsibilities including Operations, Planning, Acquisitions, Training, Human Resource Development, Finance, Integrated Defence Staff and Ministry of External affairs. Steered the induction of over 100 innovative technologies including over 10 game changing technologies in one year in 2022-23 and commissioning of INS Vikrant in the same year. Post graduate in Defence & Strategic Studies from Mumbai and Madras Universities and Personnel Management from SIBM, Pune. Was Member of high level DRDO Review Committee. Presently mentors Start-ups and is Professor of Practice in IIT Kanpur and Member of the National Advisory Council of Indian Space Association. Has been appointed as the First Secretary General of Colombo Security Conclave.

STRENGTHENING REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS: COLOMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

S.N. Ghormade

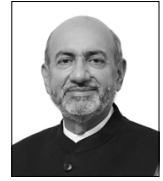
The paper seeks to address how we can coordinate our actions together to shape pathways for peace, stability and security in the Indian Ocean Region. The IORA, IONS, BIMSTEC, and the CSC each bring unique strengths to our collective pursuit of safety, stability, and sustainable use of the seas. The aim is how these mechanisms can move from coexistence towards mutually reinforcing integration, especially as we confront increasingly complex challenges and address the gaps through scalable, modular, and trust-based cooperation.

The Colombo Security Conclave's work is organised around five thematic pillars: maritime safety and security; counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation; combating trafficking and transnational organised crime; cyber security and protection of critical infrastructure and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These pillars closely mirror the risk landscape, and they position the Conclave as a practical, issues-driven complement to the broader regional institutions and can galvanise meaningful action among neighbours with strong cultural bonds.

By strengthening the coherence of our maritime architectures and embracing practical, confidence-building cooperation, we can build an ocean of opportunity not just for our nations, but for future generations. The Colombo Security Conclave complements broader economic forums by addressing precisely those maritime and transnational challenges that demand swift, coordinated and operationally effective action.

PROF. SANJAY CHATURVEDI

Vice President & Dean, Faculty of
International Studies (FIS), South Asian
University



Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi is Vice President of South Asian University, Dean of the Faculty of International Studies, and Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies. He is President of the Indian Ocean Research Group (IORG), an Observer to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Chief Editor of the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* (Routledge). He served as Lead Author for the Asia chapter (Chapter 10) of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (Working Group II, 2019-2021).

Prof. Chaturvedi pursued post-doctoral research at the University of Cambridge with a Nehru Centenary British Commonwealth Fellowship and later held a Leverhulme Research Grant at the Scott Polar Research Institute. His book *The Polar Regions: A Political Geography* (John Wiley, 1996) remains widely cited. He has authored, co-authored, and edited numerous books with Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, Routledge, Wiley, and Sage.

He has served on editorial boards of leading journals and has been a member of the Indian delegation to multiple Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings.

INDIAN OCEAN REGIONALISM AT A CROSSROADS: IORA, INTERREGNUM, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Sanjay Chaturvedi

This paper examines the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as the only pan-Indian Ocean experiment in maritime regionalism and assesses its evolving relevance amid profound global transformation and geopolitical uncertainty. Anchored in the post-Cold War interregnum, the analysis situates IORA within the resurgence of the Indian Ocean as an inter-regional space shaped by entangled logics of geopolitics, geo-economics, and geostrategy. Tracing IORA's origins in the 1990s and its commitment to "open regionalism," the paper explores the organisation's institutional design, membership dynamics, and early constraints that contributed to a crisis of limited performance. It then examines post-2010 efforts at rejuvenation, including agenda expansion, the identification of priority areas, and the landmark 2017 Leaders' Summit, which marked a shift from a narrowly economic focus towards maritime safety and security, the blue economy, disaster risk management, and inclusive development. The analysis further considers how the rise of the Indo-Pacific construct, intensifying major-power rivalry, and the systemic pressures of the Anthropocene—particularly climate change—are reshaping expectations of regional cooperation. The paper concludes by arguing that IORA stands at a critical crossroads, confronting pressing questions of institutional capacity, strategic purpose, and priority-setting in an increasingly contested, complex, and climate-stressed oceanic world.

DR. ATHAULLA AHMED RASHEED

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Dr. Athaulla Ahmed Rasheed is the Head of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former Foreign Service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two Ph.Ds in international and strategic studies, and political science from the Australian National University and the University of Queensland, Australia. Athaulla is the author of the 2025 book, “Small States Maritime Security: The Indo-Pacific Strategy for Maldives”, published by The Maldives National University. Between 2020 and 2024, Athaulla worked with the Australian National University, covering the research portfolio of Indo-Pacific small states and providing academic advisory roles to the Australian Defence and DFAT.

ROLE OF SMALL STATES IN SHAPING INDIAN OCEAN REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS: FRAMING MALDIVES' SECURITY NARRATIVES

Athaula Ahmed Rasheed

Small states are integral to the regional institutional architecture of the Indian Ocean, shaping development, political, and security interactions among South Asian states. Maldives has contributed to the evolution of political, social, and security organisations in the region, offering a foreign policy lens to explain their role and agency in the understanding of security debates. While SAARC initially emerged as a platform for regional diplomacy, the growing complexity of security dynamics and the involvement of small states in great power competition – exemplified by Maldives' foreign policy responses to Indian and Chinese regional initiatives – have linked their agency to security debates within the institutional processes of IORA and the Colombo Security Conclave. Using IORA and Colombo Security Conclave interactions, the paper discusses how Maldives' development-oriented security priorities can incorporate small state-based narratives into regional dialogues and shape collective security policy in the Indian Ocean.

Ms. BINESWAREE BOLAKY

Economic Affairs Officer, UN Economic
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Ms. Bineswaree (Aruna) Bolaky is an Economic Affairs Officer/Mid-level manager with the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) Sub-regional office for Southern Africa, based in Lusaka, Zambia where she has led programme implementation and substantive and technical work on trade, regional integration, private sector development and a range of macro-economic development issues. Before joining UNECA, she served in the Africa section and Least Developed Countries (LDC) section, of the Division for Africa, LDCs and Special Programmes at the United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva. She has been a co-author of the UNCTAD Least Developed Countries Report and the Economic Development in Africa Report. She has worked in the United Nations in the areas of economic research, policy analysis and programme management in several duty stations. Prior to that she was an instructor/lecturer at university in the US and the People's Republic of China, a consultant at the World Bank in Washington DC, and a summer intern at the IMF. She holds advanced degrees in Economics and Economics of Competition Law from the University of Cambridge, UK; Simon Fraser University, Canada; King's College, London, UK and the University of Maryland at College Park, USA. Her areas of interest include trade and regional integration, SME and private sector development, South-South cooperation, and SIDS-related issues. She is a fellow of the Cambridge Commonwealth Society. She is a national of the island of Mauritius.

LINKING MAHASAGAR TO AFRICA: INDIA'S ROLE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA) AGREEMENT

Bineswaree Bolaky

The MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) initiative of India aims to develop a global maritime vision, with particular emphasis on the global South. India has a leading role to play in the deepening of trade, sustainable development, peace and security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond. Meanwhile the Eastern and Southern African sub-region that share a littoral on the Indian Ocean are currently engaged in regional integration processes, namely the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement intended to deepen intra-African trade and intra-African investment as pathways for prosperity in Eastern and Southern Africa. The AfCFTA agreement is a flagship initiative of the AU Agenda 2063. How can India's MAHASAGAR contribute to the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement, ensuring benefits for island states in the IOR such as Comoros, Mauritius, Madagascar and Seychelles and larger states such as Mozambique that can act as transit and transport corridors to the African mainland. This paper advocates for India to leverage MAHASAGAR to contribute to Africa's AfCFTA agenda in Eastern and Southern Africa through 4 channels (i) promoting inter-island and transport connectivity in general in the African IOR (ii) supporting digital infrastructure development in the African IOR (iii) supporting the implementation of a regional blue development strategy and (iv) financing the African IOR National AfCFTA Strategies and strengthening the role of regional institutions.

DR. LOITONGBAM BISHWANJIT SINGH

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Dr. Loitongbam Bishwanjit Singh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of South East Asian Studies, Manipur University. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), Beijing, and has also served as an ICSSR Post-Doctoral Fellow at Manipur University. His academic training and research experience place him at the intersection of international trade, development economics, geo-economics, and geopolitics, with a particular focus on Northeast India, ASEAN, and the Indo-Pacific region.

Dr. Singh is the author of the book *Act East Policy, Free Trade Agreement and Economic Growth Potential of India-ASEAN* (2022), published by Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi. He has published multiple research articles in reputed and UGC-CARE listed journals, including *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Foreign Trade Review*, *Journal of Asian Politics and History*, and *Letters in Spatial and Resource Sciences*. His research contributions address issues such as global value chains, trade liberalisation, tourism linkages, geo-economic competition, and regional development.

He has also contributed chapters to several edited volumes published by Routledge and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, covering themes of environmental geopolitics, regional development, and technological spill overs. Currently, Dr. Singh is the Principal Investigator of an intramural research project funded by Manipur University titled *Disrupted Trade Corridors: Myanmar's Political Unrest and Manipur's Ethnic Conflicts*.

In addition, he has been involved as a researcher and committee member in policy-oriented projects for the Government of Manipur and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, contributing to vision documents, white papers, and detailed project reports.

RELOOKING BIMSTEC: OPTIMISING ADVANTAGES AND DEALING WITH THE DISADVANTAGES

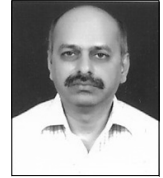
Loitongbam Bishwanjit Singh

Geo-economics increasingly shapes contemporary geopolitics, particularly in strategically contested regions such as the Bay of Bengal. BIMSTEC holds significant potential to facilitate trade, investment, and connectivity across one of the least integrated regions globally. Viewed as an alternative to SAARC, BIMSTEC aspires to overcome formidable geographic barriers and protectionist constraints through economic collaboration and socio-cultural linkages. However, persistent institutional weaknesses, irregular high-level engagement, limited political will, and implementation delays have undermined its transformative capacity. Project such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway remain stalled, reflecting deeper structural constraints, including domestic instability and security challenges. India's strategic centrality in South Asia and its articulation of the Neighbourhood First Policy in 2014 underscore the importance of stable regional cooperation. Yet BIMSTEC faces significant geopolitical pressures, including political distrust among members, asymmetrical power relations, border disputes, and China's expanding influence under the Belt and Road Initiative. The gap between policy intent and policy outcomes remains a critical challenge. This study evaluates BIMSTEC's institutional effectiveness, identifies structural and operational limitations, and examines how India can optimise regional gains while preserving strategic autonomy. It argues for calibrated reforms that fuse regional cooperation with internal resilience, balance competing external influences, and reconcile economic integration with political stability to realise BIMSTEC's geo-economic promise.

Chair

GROUP CAPTAIN (DR.) AJEY LELE

Deputy Director General
MP-IDSA



Group Captain (Dr) Ajey Lele (Retd.) is the Deputy Director General, MP-IDSA. Earlier, he was a Senior Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and a part of its Centre on Strategic Technologies. He started his professional career as an officer in the Indian Air Force, and took early retirement from the service to pursue his academic interests. He has a Masters degree in Physics from Pune University, and Masters and MPhil degrees in Defence and Strategic Studies from Madras University. He has done his doctorate from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. His specific areas of research include issues related to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), Space Security and Strategic Technologies. He has contributed articles to various national and international journals, websites and newspapers. He has authored ten books and has also been an editor for eight books. He is a recipient of the K. Subrahmanyam Award (2013) which is conferred for outstanding contribution in the area of strategic and security studies.

Vote of Thanks

DR. SMRUTI S. PATTANAİK

Conference Coordinator
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Dr. Smruti S. Pattanaik is a Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (MP-IDSA). She holds Ph.D. in South Asian Studies from the School of International Studies, JNU and specialises on politics in the South Asian region, India's policy towards its Neighbours and China in South Asia.

She was a visiting Asia Fellow at the department of International Relations, Dhaka University in 2004 and 2007, Kodikara Fellow in 1999, postdoctoral fellow at FMSH, Paris in 2008 and visiting fellow at PRIO in 2011, Fellow at the University of Hull in 2018. She was Visiting Professor on ICCR's India Chair in Colombo University in 2013. She was selected to attend the prestigious Symposium on the East Asian Security (SEAS) Program conducted by the US State Department and USPACOM in 2011. She has lectured extensively in India and abroad on India's foreign policy and South Asia.

Dr. Pattanaik has published more than 100 research articles and chapters on various aspects of politics in South Asia and have focused on India's relations with its neighbours. She is the author of "Elite Perception in Foreign Policy: Role of Print Media in influencing Indo-Pak relations, 1989-99" (2004) and has edited three books titled "South Asia: Envisioning a Regional Future" (2011) and "Four Decades of India-Bangladesh Relations: Historical Context and Future Direction" (2012), "Recounting the Memories of Bangladesh's Liberation War: Why It Is Still Relevant" (Routledge, 2024) She has also authored a monograph "Afghanistan and its Neighbourhood: In Search of a Stable Future" (PRIO-IDSA, 2014).

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