



## What is India's Neighbourhood!

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This article "Modi's visit to Male, Colombo can affirm the salience of the Indian Ocean island states", appeared in Indian Express on 7th June. It talks about the need for India to look at its Neighbourhood first policy beyond South Asia towards maritime neighbourhood also.

### What is the context?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit abroad in his second term to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, which certifies the traditional diplomatic emphasis on "Neighbourhood first"
- This move reaffirms the Indian Ocean island states into India's strategic geography. A beginning of which was made in 2015 when Indian PM travelled to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka and outlined an Indian Ocean strategy called **SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)**.

### What is Neighbourhood first policy?

- It is part of India's foreign policy that actively focuses on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours which is being termed as Neighbourhood first policy in the media
- It was started well by inviting all heads of state/heads of government of South Asian countries in his inauguration of PM Modi first term and later held bilateral talks with all of them individually which was dubbed as a mini SAARC summit.
- PM Modi made his first foreign visit to Bhutan in his first term.

### What is the current course of Indian foreign policy vis a vis India's neighbourhood?

- After SAARC becoming defunct (due to Pakistan's misadventure) PM Modi turned to the BIMSTEC, India invited BIMSTEC leaders in the swearing ceremony of PM Modi's second term.

- Earlier BIMSTEC leaders were invited to join the BRICS summit at Goa during 2016.
- But India's geopolitical thinking of neighbourhood concentrated towards the idea of South Asia has led to subdued historic commercial ties with the maritime neighbours.
- So apart from focusing mainly on the land-borne neighbourhood, Indian foreign policy has to shift its focus towards the maritime neighbourhood.
- Though some positive steps in this direction have been taken: For example:
  - PM Modi's first foreign visit in his second term is headed towards Maldives and Sri Lanka.
  - Emphasis on SAGAR narrative
  - But India needs to engage with its maritime neighbourhood more enthusiastically as strategically important countries like Myanmar, Thailand, or Indonesia with whom India shared land and/or maritime boundaries were neglected in PM Modi's first term.

## What is the importance of the Maritime Neighbourhood for India?

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- **Geo-strategically:** Indian ocean has now become the theatre of great power rivalry:
  - Growing China's assertiveness in the Indian ocean in its maritime silk road component of BRI (Belt and road initiative) project.
  - China has been also building naval bases in name of the commercial centre like Gwadar etc., which India dubbed as its encirclement under the string of pearls theory
  - Citing this India has also entered into the agreement for naval cooperation with powers like USA and France. This has triggered a base race in the Indian ocean.
- **Geo-politically:** Indian ocean is one of the world's busiest sea lines of communication.
  - It serves as an important commercial trade route but it is strategically important too
  - Citing this, from few years Sri Lanka has been persistent in claiming an "Indian Ocean identity" rather than a South Asian identity.
- **Geo-economically:** Indian ocean harbours massive resources of the blue economy: Fisheries, Rare earth metals, unexplored oil and gases etc.

## What should be the course of action for Indian foreign policy towards maritime Neighbourhood?

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India in the maritime domain must focus:

- **In the western Indian Ocean:** India can form a coherent group that must be dealt within an integrated framework. Also, India must expand its ambit of Neighbourhood policy to draw in Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion and Diego Garcia.
 

As Reunion is part of France and Diego Garcia hosts a major American military facility.

- **In the eastern Indian Ocean:** India should focus on a number of small islands which are geo-politically important as they lie at heart of sea lines of communication  
The Cocos and Keeling islands belonging to Australia come readily to mind
- In both the east and the west, India's own island territories — the Andaman and Lakshadweep, that have a critical role in reshaping our maritime neighbourhood.
- India needs to develop its own national capabilities — especially in the delivery of strategic economic and security assistance to the island states. Without that the SAGAR vision will remain elusive

With SAGAR vision, PM Modi signalled India's readiness to work with other powers in promoting regional prosperity and security. Also, There are big possibilities for collaboration with France, the US, Australia and Japan in different corners of the Indian Ocean. For this, to work out, India must now formulate a **Neighbourhood First Policy 2.0**.

***Drishti Input:***

There has been an apparent shift in India's neighbourhood policy from SAARC to BIMSTEC. Analyse the reasons behind this shift and advantages accruing to India.