

MODI'S VISIT TO MALE, COLOMBO CAN AFFIRM THE SALIENCE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN ISLAND STATES

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s first visit abroad in his second term to Maldives and Sri Lanka is being billed as the reaffirmation of Delhi's traditional diplomatic emphasis on "neighbourhood first". Hopefully, it is a little more than that — an effort to redefine what our neighbourhood is.

The visit to Male and Colombo offers the opportunity to firmly place the Indian Ocean island states into India's regional geography. A beginning was indeed made in his first term, when Modi travelled to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka in early 2015 and outlined an Indian Ocean strategy called SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). Modi must now expand the ambit of the strategy to draw in Madagascar, Comoros, Reunion and Diego Garcia. Reunion is part of France and Diego Garcia hosts a major American military facility.

Similarly, Delhi should focus on a number of small islands that dot the sea lines of communication in the eastern Indian Ocean — 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 — have a critical role in reshaping our maritime neighbourhood.

But first to the conceptions of India's strategic geography. Nothing has diminished India's geopolitical thinking than the idea of South Asia. The shrinking of India's regional vision was also reinforced by India's inward economic orientation and the sundering of historic commercial ties with the maritime neighbours.

Maps of the neighbourhood, those of the Foreign Office, barely showed countries like Myanmar, Thailand, or Indonesia with whom India shared land and/or maritime boundaries. The unfortunate conflation of "neighbourhood" with "South Asia" and SAARC was complete.

When he came to power in 2014, Modi seemed to go by the traditional South Asian framework. He invited all the leaders of the SAARC for his swearing in-ceremony to signal the commitment to putting the neighbourhood first. There was one exception though — it was the invitation to the political leadership of Mauritius to join the swearing-in. The invitation probably reflected Modi's sensibility to India's deep diasporic connection with the Indian Ocean island republic.

Whatever the intent might have been, it set the stage for visualising a region that transcends South Asia and puts the maritime neighbourhood back into India's strategic consciousness.

At the only SAARC summit during his first term, held in Kathmandu at the end of 2014, Modi saw the forum's dysfunction. It could not wrap up regional connectivity agreements negotiated for years before, thanks to Pakistan's decision to pull the plug at the last minute. With SAARC going nowhere, Modi turned to the BIMSTEC grouping, invited its leaders to join the BRICS summit at Goa during 2016, and again last month for the inauguration of Modi's second term.

The limitations of SAARC are structural and enduring. Before "South Asia" became the dominant moniker, our region was known as "the Indian Subcontinent". Many of the problems afflicting SAARC today are a legacy of the Subcontinent's tragic Partition in 1947. As new sovereignties emerged out of undivided India, there were problems aplenty to deal with.

Any number of SAARC summits are not going to resolve the quarrels in the post-Partition Subcontinent. Most of them are bilateral between India and each of its neighbours. The one exception is the nature of the disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Answers to these quarrels too will have to largely come through bilateralism. Where there has been progress in addressing these problems — for example with Bangladesh — the consequences have been huge and positive.

Delhi should have no problem recognising that Islamabad is not ready for economic integration with India; it wants a settlement of the Kashmir question to precede any economic and political cooperation with India. That might take a while. But should we hold up the rest of the region until Pakistan is comfortable with India-centred regionalism?

Modi's focus on BIMSTEC was as much about rediscovering a forgotten regional organisation as it was about putting the Bay of Bengal on India's mental map. Equally important was Modi's focus on the Indian Ocean islands. His 2015 trip to Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka was to include Maldives, but had to be cancelled at the last minute because of the crackdown on opposition leaders. Modi travelled briefly to Maldives at the end of last year to celebrate the restoration of democracy in the island state.

Over the last few years, Colombo has been persistent in claiming an "Indian Ocean identity" rather than a South Asian identity. The future of the Maldives, sitting astride one of the world's busiest sea lines of communication, is in the Indian Ocean. Both of them are acutely conscious of their growing maritime salience and have not been hesitant to develop all-round political leverage.

As Modi travels to the southern seas, Delhi must come to terms with a number of realities. First, it needs to recognise that island states and territories — including the smallest pieces of real estate — are coming into strategic play amidst the return of great power rivalry to the littoral. Second, the island states in the south western Indian Ocean form a coherent group and must be dealt within an integrated framework. In eastern Indian Ocean, a focus on developing the Andaman Islands opens up possibilities for sub-regional cooperation with Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore. Third, 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 ambitious goals identified under the SAGAR vision will remain elusive.

Finally, in his SAGAR vision, Modi signalled India's readiness to work with other powers in promoting regional prosperity and security. There are big possibilities for collaboration with France, the US, Australia and Japan in different corners of the Indian Ocean. The joint bidding by India and Japan for the development of East Container Terminal in the Colombo port

underlines the potential.

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