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India's Engagement with Island Nations in Western Indian Ocean: Towards an Inclusive Indo-Pacific

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1. Introduction

Oceans hold a place of prominence among countries from ancient times. Over two thousand years, links were forged between India and other Indian Ocean countries *via* maritime voyages undertaken by adventurers, kings, merchants, savants, religious leaders, royal emissaries and others. These connections not only fostered trade but also facilitated cross-pollination of ideas, arts and literature, religions, languages, statecraft, and habitats. The streams of commerce and culture had flowed both to India and from India to the rest of Asia and Africa, influencing a vast number of people across the world.¹

Today, ocean is viewed as global public goods, benefits of which are extended to all nations, people and environment. While oceans offer variety of living resources, hydrocarbons, energy and economic opportunities, it also plays immensely critical role in freedom of navigations, international security, peace and prosperity. Ocean resources have, therefore, facilitated the development, both on land and at sea.²

In the contemporary period, the Indian Ocean is at the heart of global geopolitics. It covers at least one-fifth of the world's total ocean area and is bounded by Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (known as the western Indian Ocean) in one side, and Southeast Asia and Oceania (known as the eastern Indian Ocean), on the other side. The Indian Ocean occupies a place of prominence between India and island nations since ancient time. This commentary talks about India's engagement with island nations in the western Indian Ocean, and briefly discusses the pathways towards an inclusive Indo-Pacific.

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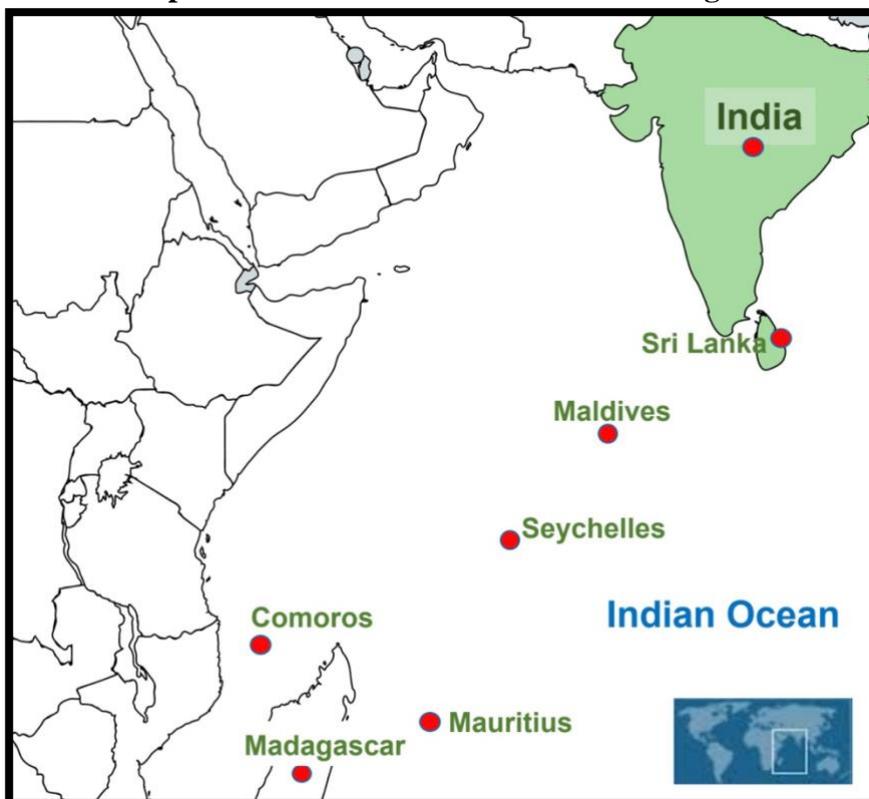
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[Views and opinions are authors' own. Usual disclaimers apply.]

2. India's Growing Relations with Island Nations

Island nations of western Indian Ocean region have gained high importance of India's foreign policy. Relation between them perhaps is presently heavily driven by security and strategic interests, followed by economic and socio-cultural aspects. In 2015, Indian Prime Minister's maiden speech at Mauritius has unfolded India's vision of "SAGAR – Security and Growth for All in the Region". The External Affairs Minister of India in his Valedictory Address at the joint Indian Ocean Dialogue and the Delhi Dialogue XI, held in December 2019, stressed the need for incorporating western Indian Ocean version in the concept of Indo-Pacific.³ In western Indo-Pacific belt, India has identified six island nations in the Indian Ocean, namely, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros (see, Map 1).

Map 1: Island Nations in Indian Ocean Region*



*Representative image and not actual
Source: Drawn by authors based on mapchart.net

These six island nations and India together contribute about 3 per cent of global surface area; about 18.5 per cent of the world population and about 3.4 per cent of world GDP, respectively (Table 1). Although there are variations in the geographical area, population and economic size among the six island nations, these six countries hold important strategic passage to world's busy sea-lanes, own precious ocean resources and offer valuable connectivity. India plays a key role not only as development partner but also a source country for the nations' economy and security. Regional integration may fall by the wayside if a regional partnership does not generate benefits for all. Greater engagement with these island nations will, therefore, pave the way for securing an inclusive Indo-Pacific region that spans from Africa to Latin America.

Table 1: Basic Profile of Island Nations, 2019

Island Countries	Land area (sq. km)	Population (million)	GDP (current US\$ billion)	GDP per capita (current US\$)	Trade (% of GDP)
Comoros	1861	0.85	1.19	1393.52	43.09
Madagascar	581800	26.97	14.08	522.22	59.82
Maldives	300	0.53	5.73	10790.50	135.74
Mauritius	2030	1.27	14.18	11203.54	92.81
Seychelles	460	0.10	1.70	17401.72	155.25
Sri Lanka	62710	21.80	84.01	3853.08	52.37
India	2973190	1366.42	2875.14	2104.15	40.02
<i>Share in World, %</i>	<i>2.84</i>	<i>18.48</i>	<i>3.41</i>	-	-

Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank

In case of trade between Indian Ocean island nations and India, island nations' export to India was about US\$ 1322 million (7 per cent of island nations' global exports) and import from India was about US\$ 5608 million (17 per cent of island nations' global imports) in 2019 (Table 2). India has a trade surplus with all the six island countries, and is having an FTA in goods with Sri Lanka and Maldives, and has been negotiating a CECPA with Mauritius. India has been one of the largest trading partners of Maldives, Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

Table 2: Trade between India and Island Nations, 2019

(US\$ Million)

	Export			Import		
	Export to India	Export to World	Share in World, %	Import from India	Import from World	Share in World, %
Comoros	18.7	70.17	26.6	19.39	306.63	6.3
Madagascar	272.73	3485.58	7.8	301.43	3773.59	8
Maldives	5.88	586.76	1	226.2	2331.65	9.7
Mauritius	26.65	2643.47	1	782.05	5228.65	14.9
Seychelles	4.84	685.04	0.7	51.82	2479.93	2.1
Sri Lanka	993.47	11584.21	8.6	4227.53	18637.71	22.7
Total Indian Ocean Island Nations	1322.27	19055.23	6.9	5608.42	32758.14	17.1

Source: DOTS, IMF

India's Diaspora linkages are very strong with the island nations. About 2.5 billion Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) have been living in these island nations (see Table 3). Indian investments in these countries, particularly Mauritius and Sri Lanka, have been growing. India has also been receiving foreign direct investment (FDI) from Mauritius and Sri

Lanka, quite substantially. What follows is that India has been witnessing an expanding economic relationship with the island nations through commercial and Diaspora linkages.

Table 3: Overseas Indian in Island Nations in the Indian Ocean Region

(in 000's)

Country	Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)	Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs)	Total Overseas Indian
Comoros	0.03	0.2	0.23
Madagascar	2.5	15	17.5
Maldives	25	0.11	25.11
Mauritius	10.5	884	894.5
Seychelles	5.2	12	17.2
Sri Lanka	14	1600	1614
Total Island Nations	57.23	2511.31	2568.54
World	13459.2	18683.6	32100.3
<i>Share in World (in %)</i>	<i>0.42</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>8.0</i>

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

3. India's Maritime Cooperation with Island Nations

Islands in the Indian Ocean are located near to prime sea-lanes, thereby providing access and influencing over important chokepoints and waterways. Securing the maritime neighbourhood in western Indian Ocean has gained high importance.⁴ Some of these island nations provide immensely critical sea-lanes (trade routes) that connect the eastern Africa and Gulf with Southeast and East Asia and beyond. The Port of Colombo, for example, is strategically located on the East-West shipping corridor. At the same time, the island nations and India face several non-traditional security threats such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, natural disasters, drug and gun smuggling, to mention a few.⁵ Indian Navy has been providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) in these island nations as a trusted partner for many years. Therefore, the island nations of the Indian Ocean hold immense strategic value in ensuring maritime security and safety.

Indian Ocean island nations also have strong cultural and civilisation linkages with India. Connected by the same ocean, these countries face similar developmental challenges. Standing at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka have high strategic importance in terms of access to prime sea-lanes. Besides, the EEZs of Madagascar, Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles span over 1 million sq. km., which allow these island nations greater sovereign rights in ocean waters and embedded resources⁶. India has recently signed defence cooperation agreements with Madagascar and Comoros and also extended support to improve maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean, including information sharing, new radar and communication facilities, regular patrols with P-i8 surveillance aircraft to detect illegal fishing in the island nations in the Indian Ocean region, in

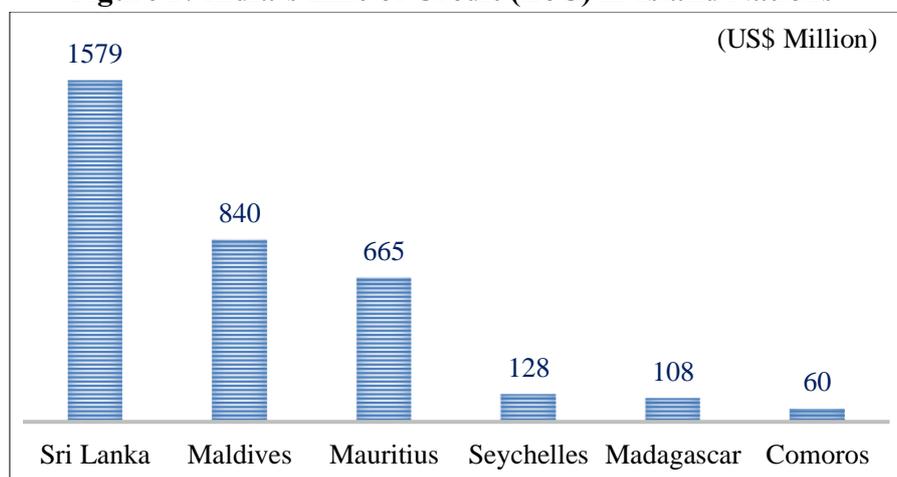
addition to other activities.⁷ Besides, India has supplied a surveillance vessel to Mauritius for strengthening the coast guard's capacities.

To conclude, greater engagement with the island nations of the western Indian Ocean will not only narrow the gap in the security front but also enhance economic partnership. Island nations look at India as a partner for their economic development and also to uphold their cultural identities.

4. India's Development Cooperation with Island Nations

India has initiated several development cooperation projects and granted Line of Credit (LoC) of about US\$ 3.45 billion to the island nations in the Indian Ocean during the period 2004-05 to 2019-20 (see Figure 1). Sri Lanka is among the major recipients of development assistance extended from India; the country has received an amount of US\$ 1,579 million LoC. For instance, in November 2019, India has offered financial assistance of US\$ 450 million to Sri Lanka including US\$ 50 million to fight terrorism. Besides, India has also granted US\$ 400 million LoC to strengthen the infrastructure and housing projects such as the construction of about 50,000 houses in Sri Lanka in 2018 and also offered about US\$ 100 million LoC for setting up solar projects.⁸ Besides, India has also disbursed a loan of about US\$ 332 million on 12 high impact community development projects in areas of education, health, transport connectivity, small and medium enterprises development and training across the country under the grant assistance (see Table 4).

Figure 1: India's Line of Credit (LoC) in Island Nations*



Note: * For the period 2004-05 to 2019-20

Sources: EXIM Bank database and various newspaper collections

India has granted about US\$ 840 million LoC to the Maldives, where the Export-Import Bank of India (Exim Bank) has extended US\$ 800 million to finance development projects in March 2019 and US\$ 5.5 million for the implementation of high impact development projects and US\$ 6.9 million for implementation of socio-economic development projects to support community infrastructure, health lifestyles, access to education, law and order and environmental protection.⁹

The other projects under both grants and loans are on water and sanitation in 34 islands, fisheries, road development and reclamation in Addu city, development of GulhiFathu port, construction of a cricket stadium in Hulhumale and Cancer Hospital with the support of the EXIM Bank. Besides, India has granted and supported the building hospitals and educational institutions such as Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, Maldives Institute of Technical Education, India-Maldives Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies, Technology Adoption Programme in Education Sector, National Police Academy (ISLES) in the Maldives.

Table 4: India’s Development Assistance with Island Nations

	Number of Projects	Recent Major Projects	Grants & loans till 2019-20 (US\$ Million)	
			Allocated	Disbursed
Mauritius	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offshore Patrol Vessel, 2015 • ENT Hospital Project, 2018 • Light Rail Transit Phase 1, 2019 • Supreme Court Building, 2020 	377.47	236.84
Maldives	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast Interceptor Craft, 2019 • RuPay Agreement, 2019 • High Impact Community Development Projects in Addu, 2019 • Street Lighting and LED Bulbs Project, 2019 • Coastal Surveillance Radar System, 2019 • Composite Training Centre, 2019 	268.00	219.13
Seychelles	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal Surveillance Radar System, 2015 	112.24	53.11
Sri Lanka	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of 46,000 houses under Indian Housing Program, Northern and Eastern Province, 2015 • Construction of 4000 houses in Plantation Areas for Estate Workers, 2018 • Emergency Ambulance Service, 2019 • Culture Center at Jaffna, 2020 	434.13	331.83

Source: Authors’ own based on the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

Mauritius is a gateway to the Indian Ocean region and to Africa, which can serve as a hub for Indian companies looking to access the African mainland. India and Mauritius share common security concerns in the Indian Ocean region. India has extended LoC of about US\$ 665 million to Mauritius, which includes US\$ 500 million for development of maritime security-related projects in the maritime domain and US\$ 100 million in 2018 for defence capacity building, as part of its Indian Ocean outreach that focuses on maritime security and Blue Economy. India has also disbursed a loan of about US\$ 237 million for four major projects for construction and infrastructure development (see Table 4). India has also initiated several capacity building programmes and set up educational and hospitals in Mauritius, such as Swami Vivekananda International Convention Centre (SVICC), Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre, Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Jawaharlal Nehru Chair for Indian Studies, Apravasi Ghat, Rabindranath Tagore Institute, Prof. B.S. Upadhyaya Training Centre, World Hindi Secretariat, etc.

The first Indian president visited Madagascar is President Ram Nath Kovind, which signifies India's focus towards African island nations. Madagascar has received about US\$ 108 million LoC from India for raising the productivity of rice and setting up of fertilizer plants of about US\$ 25 million in 2008;¹⁰ further US\$ 2.5 million was also granted to complete the project in 2017. In addition, India has extended LoC of US\$ 80.72 million for the development of irrigation, food processing projects and farm mechanization in four regions of Madagascar in 2019. India has also offered aid assistance in several occasion of natural disaster experienced by Madagascar. For example, US\$ 100,000 for the tropical cyclone Haruna in 2013, US\$ 200,000 for the Cdedza cyclone in 2015, US\$ 2 million to the natural disaster management agency of Madagascar, etc. India has donated Bhabhatron-II cancer treatment machine to Madagascar in March 2018 during the visit of Indian President.

As a part of South-South Cooperation, India has also initiated several capacity building programmes such as ITEC, India-Africa Forum Summit Scholarships, CV Raman Scholarship, courses at RIS and SS-FSI, ICCR scholarships, and journalists training programme in the island nations. In 2019-20, about 60 students/scholars/officials of Madagascar benefited from such programmes. India has also set up a Centre for Geo-Informatics Applications in Rural Development (CGARD) in February 2016.¹¹ Madagascar has also benefited from India's initiative on Pan-African e-network project and tele-education and tele-medicine.

Another island nation with which India has established diplomatic relation in the recent past is Seychelles. This country is extremely important for commercial as well as strategic reasons. India has granted about US\$ 100 million LoC for the building of infrastructure for the military defence security and naval base at Assumption Island in Seychelles. Both India and Seychelles made six agreements for the implementation of several development projects and also in the area of cyber-security. Further, India has proposed to invest about US\$ 550 million for the development of an airstrip, jetty, and housing infrastructure for Seychelles Coast Guard in Assumption Island. Similarly, India extended over US\$ 60 million LoC to Comoros for energy and maritime defence cooperation, which includes 18 MW Power Plant in Moroni of about US\$ 42 million and US\$ 20 million for the procurement of High-Speed Interceptor Boats.¹²

4. India's Response to Covid-19 in Island Nations

During the early months of Covid-19, India outreached to the South Asian countries and island nations (Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles) through video-conference and provided medical assistance, essential medicines and food items, etc (see Table 5). In response to the Covid-19 crisis, Indian Prime Minister had a video conference/telephonic conversation with the President of the Maldives on 20 April 2020 and with the President of Sri Lanka on 23 May 2020. India launched 'Mission Sagar' on 10 May 2020 on a special 'COVID Relief Mission' carrying 580 tons of food aid and essential medicines and also dispatched medical assistance team to the island nations in the southern Indian Ocean region through Indian

Naval Ship Kesari.¹³ India was the first responder to Mauritius and Seychelles to supply medicines. The medical supply includes hydroxychloroquine tablets to all the island nations.

Table 5: India's Engagement in Island Nations in the Indian Ocean in Response to Covid-19

	Comoros	Madagascar	Maldives	Mauritius	Seychelles	Sri Lanka
Head to Head - Telephonic / Video Conferencing			√			√
Mission SAGAR (Medical Assistance and Distribution of Medical and Pharmaceutical supplies)	√	√	√	√	√	√
Repatriation of stranded by Sea (Operation Samudra Setu Initiative)			√			√
Repatriation of stranded by Air (Vande Bharat Mission)			√	√	√	√

Note: As on 21 July 2020. Empty cell presents data/information not available.

Source: Authors' own based on several secondary sources

Table 6: India's Repatriation Initiatives by Air and Ocean with Island Nations of Indian Ocean Region

Phase	Countries	Number of Trips by Flights/Ships	Indian City Air/Sea Ports Covered
By Air: Vande Bharat Mission			
Phase 2	Maldives	2	Bengaluru
	Mauritius	2	Delhi
	Sri Lanka	1	Mumbai
Phase 3	Maldives	4	Bhubaneshwar
	Mauritius	1	Kolkata
	Seychelles	1	Trivandrum
	Sri Lanka	2	Lucknow
Phase 4	Sri Lanka	3	Gaya
			Chennai
By Sea: Samudra Setu			
	Maldives	5	Kochi and Tuticorin
	Sri Lanka	1	Tuticorin

Source: Authors' compilation from Ministry of External Affairs and Indian Navy

India has initiated repatriation of stranded citizens of island nations along with Indian citizens both by air and sea under the Vande Bharat Mission and Operation Samudra Setu initiatives¹⁴ (see Table 6). Through this mission, India has repatriated thousands of Indian citizens from island nations and also extended assistance to island nations to bring back their citizens from India.

5. Way Forward

India's engagements with the maritime partners in the Indian Ocean region in the pandemic time underscore its commitment under the 'Neighborhood First' and 'Vision of SAGAR'. India's health diplomacy in island nations of the Indian Ocean has further strengthened the relationship. India's increasing development cooperation for various infrastructure and socio-economic development projects has been widely recognized and appreciated. India's partnership with the island nations can be further reinforced through projects in digital connectivity and technical assistance in e-commerce, e-learning, e-healthcare, which are essentials for sustainable and resilient recovery in post-Covid.

India may also explore offering Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to the island nations related to healthcare facilities dealing with pandemic, medicines and vaccines, etc. Another important area is natural disaster management, where India can assist setting up information sharing centre in the island nations to mitigate the risk of natural disasters and help the countries through early-warning.

Recently, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has engaged in currency swap agreement with Maldives of US\$ 150 million and Sri Lanka of US\$ 400 million to address the exchange rate volatility and facilitate trade between India and respective island nations. This initiative can be extended to other island nations, if needed, or multilateralised. At this crisis time, an India-Island Nations Special Fund to deal with natural disaster and related activities may elevate the partnership to a higher level.

Most of the island nations have signed and ratified the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in the Indian Ocean region. There is a scope for potential cooperation between India and island nations in the Indian Ocean to work together for a sustainable health and community building. Perhaps, building a green strategic partnership between India and island nations may pave the way to better meet the SDGs.

Some projects worth undertaking are Network of Think-Tanks between India and Island Nations and hosting annual dialogue; fellowship and scholarship to some of the island nations such as Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros; setting up health care facilities including testing laboratories; trade standard testing laboratories; exchange of expertise, etc. India's rich experience dealing with such projects in eastern part of Indian Ocean region such as ASEAN and BIMSTEC may be extended to the island nations.

Finally, safe and secure sea-lanes are essentials to promote trade. Island nations in western Indian Ocean, therefore, hold key to Indo-Pacific gains.

End Notes:

¹ Refer, for example, AIC (2019)

² Refer, Oceans and the Law of Seas, available at <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/oceans-and-law-sea/>

³ Refer, for example, MEA (2019a)

- ⁴ Refer, for example, Chauhan et. al. (2020)
- ⁵ Refer, for example, Bateman (2016)
- ⁶ Refer, for example, Gupta (2018)
- ⁷ Refer, for example, The Lowy Institute (2019)
- ⁸ Refer, for example, Business Line (2019)
- ⁹ Refer, for example, MEA (2019b)
- ¹⁰ The then Malagasy (Madagascan) Minister of Agriculture signed an agreement in New Delhi in 2008 with EXIM Bank of India. The implementation of project was delayed due to political and economic situation in the country. An additional LoC of US\$ 2.5 million to complete implementing the US\$ 25 million LoC project was approved by the Government of India in February 2017 and the work is in progress.
- ¹¹ The Centre was jointly inaugurated by the President of India and the Malagasy President on 14 March 2018 and the Centre is presently functional. The bilateral agreement for establishment of CGARD Centre which was signed in 2016 for a period of three years, has been extended up to March 2021.
- ¹² Refer, for example, AIR (2019)
- ¹³ Refer, for example, MEA (2020)
- ¹⁴ Indian Navy launched ‘Samudra Setu’ on 5 May 2020 as part of the national effort to repatriate Indian citizens from overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic has culminated after successfully bringing 3,992 Indian citizens back to their homeland by sea. The operation involved 55 days and traversing more than 23,000 km by sea.

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About AIC

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विकासशील देशों की अनुसंधान एवं सूचना प्रणाली

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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