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Q19

Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of Indian government to improve relationship with its neighbours. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · GS II · 12 marks · India and its Neighbourhood

India and its neighborhood - relations.

Core demand of the question

- Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of Indian government to improve relationship with its neighbours. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss

Revision summary

Project Mausam is a Ministry of Culture programme on Indian Ocean monsoon heritage.

It can improve neighbourly ties through shared ports, faith routes and scholarship.

It has a strategic dimension as a narrative of India as a resident Indian Ocean power.

It sits beside, not in place of, **SAGAR** and naval cooperation.

Without real research and MEA follow-through, it remains a brochure against harder Chinese infrastructure.

Introduction

Project Mausam was launched by the Ministry of Culture as a trans-national research and heritage programme on the **Indian Ocean world** - monsoon winds, ports, pilgrims, and shared built culture from East Africa to Southeast Asia. It is unique in tone: culture and monsoon, not a military pact. Neighbours and Indian Ocean States are invited through UNESCO-style heritage, museums and scholarship. That soft wrapping still sits on a map where sea lanes, China, and island States are strategic. The project has a strategic dimension, even if its tools are archaeology and festivals rather than bases.

Body

What Project Mausam is

- **It treats the monsoon as a historical infrastructure:** dhows, hajj routes, spice and textile trades, and coastal communities that linked India to Arabia, Africa, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the Malay world.
- The Ministry of Culture, with the Indira **Gandhi** National Centre for the Arts and the Archaeological Survey of India, is the nodal face. UNESCO World Heritage nomination of Indian Ocean cultural routes has been part of the ambition.
- It is not a Ministry of Defence programme and not a substitute for a navy. Calling it only "foreign policy" is also incomplete; it is cultural diplomacy with a foreign-policy use.

How it can improve neighbourly and regional ties

- Shared heritage is a language that does not begin with a border incident. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Oman and Southeast Asian partners can meet India on temples, mosques, ports and monsoon lore.
- For neighbours tired of a security-first conversation, a culture project lowers the temperature and keeps India present in universities and museums.
- It offers India a story of historical centrality in the Indian Ocean that is older than any extra-regional navy - a narrative asset in IORA and in island diplomacy.
- People-to-people contact (scholars, restorers, tourist circuits) can outlast a single government's slogan if the work is real.

The strategic dimension - yes, with limits

- Geography is strategy. Whoever shapes the story of the Indian Ocean shapes who is seen as a resident power. Mausam answers, in the cultural field, a Chinese Maritime Silk Road / Belt and Road story that also uses heritage and ports.
- Island and littoral partners are the same partners India needs for maritime domain awareness, Exclusive Economic Zones, and denial of extra-regional bases. Culture is a door; hydrography and white-shipping agreements walk through later.
- **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region), announced in 2015, is the security twin. Mausam is not **SAGAR**, but they occupy the same ocean mental map: India as a net security and cultural provider, not an outsider.
- Diaspora and Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist links around the rim can be strategic communication against the charge that India is only a South Asian land power.
- **Limits:** a UNESCO file does not stop a port concession, a submarine sale, or a debt deal. If Mausam stays a brochure, neighbours will still balance with Beijing on hard infrastructure.
- Over-playing "Indic ocean" can worry partners who remember hierarchy, not only monsoon brotherhood. Strategic use must stay invitational, not civilisational preaching.
- Budget, excavation quality, and coordination with MEA and the Navy's cooperation programmes decide whether the dimension is real or rhetorical.

Discuss, do not inflate

- Unique, yes, as an official monsoon-heritage frame. Foreign policy, yes, as regional branding. Strategic, yes, as narrative and access in a contested ocean. Decisive, no, as a hard-power tool.

Flow diagram

Project Mausam culture monsoon -> Heritage UNESCO neighbours
 Project Mausam culture monsoon -> Strategic ocean narrative
 Strategic ocean narrative -> Compete with MSR story
 Strategic ocean narrative -> Island and littoral access
 SAGAR navy IORA -> Island and littoral access
 Heritage UNESCO neighbours -> Ties if delivery is real

Conclusion

Project Mausam is a cultural-diplomacy initiative that can improve ties with Indian Ocean neighbours by stressing shared monsoon history rather than only security files. It does have a strategic dimension: it contests other powers' ocean narratives, keeps India present on littoral and island agendas, and complements maritime policies such as **SAGAR**. That dimension works only if heritage work is serious and is not sold as a substitute for trade, infrastructure and a capable navy.

Facts & figures

Launch and nodal ministry

Project Mausam was launched as a Ministry of Culture initiative (2014) with IGNCA and ASI as key implementing faces.

Indian Ocean world

The project maps historical links from East Africa and Arabia through India to Southeast Asia, using the monsoon as the connecting fact.

UNESCO angle

India has sought to frame trans-national cultural routes of the Indian Ocean for international heritage recognition.

SAGAR (2015)

Security and Growth for All in the Region, Prime Minister Modi's maritime vision; the hard-security complement to a culture project on the same ocean.

Maritime Silk Road contrast

China's ocean narrative and port investments are the main strategic backdrop against which Mausam's story of a historical Indian Ocean is read.

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