

FROM SAGAR TO MAHASAGAR: INDIA ASPIRES LEADERSHIP ROLE IN IOR

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a visit to Mauritius from 11 to 12 March 2025. He was the Guest of Honour as Mauritius celebrated its Independence Day (12 March). During the visit, the two countries signed a number of agreements/MoUs relating, inter alia, to socio-economic cooperation as well as maritime security.¹ India also agreed to provide an INR 487 crore dedicated line of credit for the replacement of water pipelines in Mauritius. Prime Minister Modi also promised to establish a police academy in addition to a National Maritime Information Sharing Centre in Mauritius.² The visit marked a significant milestone in India's oceanic outreach and desire of leadership role in the region.

Historical Overview & Significance of Recent Visit

Traditionally, India has enjoyed close and cordial relations with Mauritius. Apart from shared history and culture, one of the most striking features of this relationship is the fact that 70 percent of

¹ 'List of Outcomes: Visit of Prime Minister to Mauritius (March 11-12, 2025),' Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 March 2025, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/39158/List_of_Outcomes_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Mauritius_March_1112_2025.

² Sachin Parashar, 'Sagar to Mahasagar: India Upgrades Mauritius Ties,' *Times of India*, March 13, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sagar-to-mahasagar-india-upgrades-mauritius-ties/articleshow/118953086.cms>.

Mauritius's population is of Indian origin. That is why Mauritius is also called 'mini-India'.³ Historically speaking, the first batch of Indians was brought from Puducherry in 1729 to Mauritius, which was a French and British colony, to work as artisans and masons. Under the British rule, between 1834 and the early-1990s, around half a million Indians were brought to Mauritius. About two-thirds of these Indians later permanently settled in the island. To this day, the arrival of the first batch comprising 36 Indian workers on 2 November 1834 is observed as 'Aapravasi Diwas' (Immigrant Day) in Mauritius.⁴

In the post-independence era, India and Mauritius established diplomatic relations in 1948. Ever since Mauritius gained its independence, the relationship has been on an upward trajectory marked by high-level bilateral exchanges and cooperation in various fields. Mauritian Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam was the only non-SAARC leader invited to Prime Minister Modi's swearing-in ceremony in 2014, which indicated the significance attached to bilateral ties.⁵ In 2022-23, mutual trade between India and Mauritius reached US\$554 million.⁶

In recent times, Mauritius has assumed greater importance for India. Mauritius has become an integral part of India's 'Ocean Diplomacy' goals. This is also illustrated by the announcement of a new 'MAHASAGAR' policy by India, which is in continuation of the earlier 'SAGAR' policy initiated by Prime Minister Modi in 2015.

The 'SAGAR' Vision

The BJP-led NDA government introduced the SAGAR initiative (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in Port Louis, Mauritius, in 2015. The acronym SAGAR was first used by Mr. Modi at the commissioning ceremony of a Kora-class corvette – the first warship manufactured and exported by India for the Mauritian Coast Guard. The event sought to project India's 'net security provider' role in the Indian Ocean region. The occasion also aimed to shed the notion of India's sea-blindness and promote its strategic and economic interests in the maritime domain. The SAGAR initiative envisioned a strategy that included: establishing institutional frameworks for sustained interaction; capacity-building of partners; and streamlining relationships to attend to partner requirements. The

³ Radhey Tambi, 'Putting SAGAR in Operation Under Modi 3.0,' *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/putting-sagar-in-operation-under-modi-3-0/>.

⁴ 'India - Mauritius,' High Commission of India, Port Louis, Mauritius, accessed 25 March 2025, <https://hcimauritius.gov.in/pages?id=9avme&subid=yb8md&nextid=RdG7d>.

⁵ 'India-Mauritius Relations,' India Africa Network, accessed 25 March 2025, <https://indiaafrica.net/india-mauritius-relations/>.

⁶ Shyam Saran, 'India, Mauritius and a Visit to Deepen Long-Standing Ties,' *The Hindu*, March 9, 2025, sec. Comment, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-mauritius-and-a-visit-to-deepen-long-standing-ties/article69310531.ece>.

strategy had several key areas of engagement, i.e., protecting continental and maritime stakes of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and ASEAN along with Pacific Island countries by encouraging security and prosperity. This goal was meant to be achieved through economic, security and increased maritime cooperation; cooperation for sustainable development; collective action in regional institutions; and regional connectivity projects. Later, in 2019, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative was launched to coordinate the SAGAR initiative among the IOR, East Asian countries, and other strategic partners. Under the SAGAR initiative, India has been lending support for enhancing the capacity of partners like Mauritius and Fiji by organizing training workshops, extending support in surveillance, and providing coast guard patrol ships. According to observers, budgetary shortfalls and lack of resources are some of the reasons posing challenges in the effective implementation of the SAGAR initiative.⁷

‘MAHASAGAR’

During this latest visit to Mauritius, Prime Minister Modi upgraded ‘SAGAR’ vision to ‘MAHASAGAR’ (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). “We have taken the SAGAR vision forward for the stability and prosperity of this entire region. Today taking it forward, I would like to say that our vision for the Global South will be, beyond SAGAR---[it will be] Mahasagar that is ‘Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” Mr. Modi proclaimed in his statement.⁸

The new initiative focuses on areas including trade particularly in technology-sharing as well as capacity-building for continuing growth, especially for Global South countries; mutual security to combat threats of organized crime and terrorism along with addressing the issue of maritime insecurity, and defence cooperation to enhance security in the IOR and beyond. It also places emphasis on sustainable development and support for the Global South in renewable energy and green technologies through technology transfer and capacity building.⁹ India seeks to project this initiative as a means to enhance the voice of the Global South to be heard across the world.¹⁰ It is within the MAHASAGAR framework that the Indian Navy recently organized mega wargames with

⁷ Ladhu R. Choudhary, ‘Assessing India’s SAGAR Plan: Challenges Override Prospects’, South Asian Voices, December 19, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/assessing-indias-sagar-plan-challenges-override-prospects/>.

⁸ ‘What is Mahasagar vision? New policy for Global South unveiled by PM Modi in Mauritius,’ *Times of India*, March 12, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/what-is-mahasagar-vision-new-policy-for-global-south-unveiled-by-pm-modi-in-mauritius/articleshow/118942589.cms>

⁹ Dr Kashif Hasan Khan, ‘Modi’s Mauritius Visit and the Mahasagar Initiative: A Bold Step But Hurdles Remain,’ *Modern Diplomacy*, March 21, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/03/21/modis-mauritius-visit-and-the-mahasagar-initiative-a-bold-step-but-hurdles-remain/>.

¹⁰ Parashar, ‘Sagar to Mahasagar: India Upgrades Mauritius Ties’.

several African nations under the India-Africa Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) initiative.¹¹ Besides challenging the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, the aim of this exercise is to expand defence cooperation with the African continent, combat criminal activities, and fight piracy.¹²

Conclusion

Mauritius is important for India for a variety of reasons. It is strategically located in the Southwest of the Indian Ocean along important sea-lanes linking Europe and West Africa with Asia via the Cape of Good Hope. Mauritius serves as a protector of the Western Indian Ocean and maritime security cooperation, which New Delhi perceives as critical for enhancing India's maritime security. Mauritius assumes further significance for India owing to its 2.3 million square kilometers Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) where India has established a number of coastal radar stations. India has developed the Mauritian island of Agalega so that it can serve as a facility for joint surveillance and give access to the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram (India) to promote domain awareness in the EEZ. For New Delhi, Mauritius has assumed greater importance also because China is expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean.¹³

Since Mauritius holds a special place in India's strategic and security calculus, India has extended US\$1.1 billion in concessional loans and grants to Mauritius in the last decade and helped in building infrastructure in health and housing sectors. Mauritius is one of the top five recipients of India's foreign assistance. Mauritius is also home to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat. India has been advocating Mauritius rights on the Chagos Archipelago.¹⁴ Prime Minister Modi's visit on the one hand, was meant to reinforce the bilateral relationship, and, on the other hand, it sought to ensure that Mauritius remains under Indian influence and does not tilt towards China. China today is one of the most important players in Mauritius, particularly in the economic sphere. Since

11 'India, Africa Deepen Maritime Cooperation with Inaugural AIKEYME 2025,' *Defence Star*, April 13, 2025, sec. News, <https://www.defencestar.in/defence-news/africa-india-key-maritime-engagement-exercise-aikeyme/8922/>.

12 Chinedu Okafor, 'India Initiates War Game with 10 African Countries,' *Business Insider Africa*, March 25, 2025, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/india-initiates-war-game-with-10-african-countries/n7f5d9s>.

13 Shyam Saran, 'India, Mauritius and a visit to deepen long-standing ties,' *Hindu*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-mauritius-and-a-visit-to-deepen-long-standing-ties/article69310531.ece>

14 The Chagos archipelago consists of more than 60 low-lying islands with Diego Garcia being the biggest. Mauritius was part of French colony. After the fall of French Empire, France ceded Mauritius and Chagos to Great Britain. In 1950s, US expressed its interest in establishing a military base in Diego Garcia which later became operational in 1986. In March 1968, British granted independence to Mauritius sans Chagos archipelago. Mauritius had been claiming sovereignty over the Chagos islands. After a long legal and diplomatic struggle, a deal was struck between Mauritius and Britain in October 2024 where Britain recognized Mauritius claims over Chagos. However, as per this deal, Britain would exercise sovereign rights for a period of 99- years. India has and continues to support Mauritius in this regard in line with its stated policy of decolonization and territorial integrity of all nations.

2019, when China and Mauritius signed a Free Trade Agreement that went into effect in 2021, the Mauritius-China trade reached \$1.1 billion in 2024, which was 10.7% more than the previous year.¹⁵ Besides economic investments, India also fears China's growing footprint in the Indian ocean by acquiring ports in countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Ethiopia. India, therefore, feels that it needs to step up its engagement with Mauritius which is strategically located and is known as gateway to Western Indian Ocean and Africa where Chinese presence is extending. Hence, Mauritius is not just a bilateral partner but a strategic partner in India's broader oceanic strategy that is helping to strengthen India's role as a key player in the evolving security and economic architecture of the Indian Ocean region

¹⁵ "China and Mauritius", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/3039_664104/#:~:text=China%20and%20Mauritius%20have%20a%20strategic%20partnership.&text=China%20and%20Mauritius%20have%20signed,%20year%20increase%20of%2010.1%25