

India and Mauritius: Cooperating to Ensure Collective Maritime Security

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On 16 August 2017, the Indian built Water Jet Fast Patrol Vessel ‘CGS Valiant’ was commissioned by the Prime Minister of Mauritius Pravind Jugnauth at Port Louis Mauritius. This was the third ship supplied by an Indian Defence shipyard to be commissioned in the National Coast Guard (NCG) of Mauritius.¹ Speaking on this occasion, the Mauritius Prime Minister said that CGS Valiant would upgrade the operational capability of the Mauritius NCG. It would help in Mauritius long journey towards enhancing maritime safety and security, especially in combating against poaching of its marine and fish resources, illicit activities in its seas, including drug trafficking and other types of transnational crimes.²

Earlier, in May 2017, the Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth had paid a state visit to India. This was his first overseas visit after becoming Prime Minister of Mauritius in January 2017. In the press statement made on the occasion of Jugnauth’s May 2017 visit, the Indian Prime Minister Modi said, “As frontline states of the Indian Ocean, Prime Minister Jugnauth and I agree that it is our responsibility to ensure collective maritime security around our coasts and in our EEZs.”³ Both leaders agreed that India-Mauritius cooperation is very important for the effective management of conventional and non-conventional security threats in the Indian Ocean. Modi also recalled his March 2015 visit to Mauritius. It was during this visit to the island country that Modi had spelt out India’s vision for the Indian Ocean which is ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’ also known by its acronym-SAGAR. That Mauritius was chosen to enunciate such an important policy brings out the geostrategic importance the island nation holds for India.

The special relation that exists between the two countries was given emphatic expression in May 2014, when Mauritius was the only non-SAARC country invited for the swearing-in-ceremony of Modi as Prime Minister. Further, in April 2005, the very first official bilateral visit of the then Indian Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh upon his assuming office, was to Mauritius.⁴ Also, in March 2013, the President of India, H.E. Pranab

Mukherjee, made a state visit to Mauritius as the Chief Guest at the 45th anniversary of the Independence of Mauritius. ⁵

The strong India-Mauritius relations may be traced to the historical and cultural links the two countries share. It was in the year 1834 that the first batch of Indian indentured labourers travelled through the waters of the Indian Ocean in the ship 'Atlas' and arrived in Mauritius, in the month of November. With them, they also brought the plural cultural heritage of India to Mauritius; and their descendants continue to make valuable contributions to the development of the island country.⁶ Over sixty per cent of the population in Mauritius is Indo-Mauritian, consisting of immigrants from India and their descendants.

In the above context, this issue brief examines the close maritime cooperation between the two countries. It re-visits Modi's March 2015 visit to Mauritius; and examines the significance of Prime Minister Jugnauth's May 2017 visit to India. The essay argues that engagement at the highest level has always been an important feature of India-Mauritius relations. Both countries have cooperated on a wide range of issues and India has contributed in many infrastructure and capacity building projects in Mauritius. However, Modi's bilateral visit to Mauritius in March 2015 marks a watershed for taking a holistic approach to maritime cooperation in both, its economic and security dimensions. Modi referred to this holistic approach by the acronym SAGAR.

Re-visiting Modi's March 2015 Visit to Mauritius

Prime Minister Modi visited Mauritius on 11-12 March 2015. He was the Chief Guest for the National Day of Mauritius and addressed a special session of its National Assembly. Modi, jointly commissioned along with Mauritius Prime Minister, the offshore patrol vessel (OPV) Barracuda, which is the first custom-built vessel exported by India. Bilateral agreements concerning maritime security, maritime infrastructure, and maritime economy, were concluded. These included the development of sea and air transportation facilities at Agalega Island and cooperation in the development of an ocean economy.

During this visit, Modi stressed the geo-strategic importance of the Indian Ocean which he described as 'our common maritime home'. He said that two-thirds of the world's oil shipments; one-third of its bulk cargo; and half of its container traffic, transit through the Indian Ocean. Further, it has over forty littoral states and over forty per cent of the world's population. Also ninety per cent of India's trade by volume and ninety per cent of its oil imports take place through the seas. The seas are thus critical for both the economic

prosperity and social stability of most nations in the world. It is in this context that Modi called for cooperation between Mauritius and India and the need to take collective responsibility to ensure that the Indian Ocean is safe, secure and free from both conventional and non-conventional threats.

The highlight of the visit, however, was his vision for the Indian Ocean Region which he articulated while commissioning the OPV Barracuda. Modi called this policy 'Security and Growth for All in the Region'-and articulated its acronym 'SAGAR'. According to this vision, India would do everything to safeguard its sovereignty and interests which include its 7,500 km long coastline; its 1,200 islands; and, the 2.02 million sq km of its Exclusive Economic Zone. Second, India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities. For this, India would cooperate on the exchange of information, coastal surveillance, building of infrastructure and strengthening their capabilities. Third, India believes that it is only through collective action and cooperation that peace can be advanced in the region and thus associations like the IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) are important. These mechanisms also strengthen efforts to counter non-State actors engaged in piracy, terrorism and other crimes. Fourth, India seeks an integrated approach and cooperative future, which will result in sustainable development for all in the region. Bringing out the importance and centrality of the 'Blue Economy' to India, the Indian Prime Minister said that the blue chakra or wheel in India's national flag represents the potential of the Blue Revolution or Ocean Economy. Lastly, he opined that those who are resident in the region, i.e., the littoral countries have the primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. With other nations who have strong stakes in the region, India progresses her engagement through dialogue, visits, naval exercises, capacity building, capability enhancement, and economic partnerships.⁷

The dominant narrative among analysts has been that SAGAR was a response to the increasing China's engagement in the Indian Ocean region. However, a close examination does not show this view to be well-founded. SAGAR marks not a new beginning but continuity in the nature of the regional and bilateral maritime engagement that India has had with its maritime neighbours. For example, it is important to note that since 1991, the Indian Coast Guard and the MNDF (Maldives National Defence Forces) have been conducting a combined exercise series called DOSTI⁸. With regard to Mauritius, the joint statement issued at the conclusion of the state visit of the Prime Minister of Mauritius, Navinchandra Ramgoolam, in October 2005, clearly spells out the direction that the bilateral relations were taking on issues of defence and security. According to it, Mauritius expressed interest in the purchase of an Advanced Light Helicopter, an Offshore Patrol

Vessel, and a Coastal Surveillance Radar System, in order to strengthen the naval and air surveillance capabilities of Mauritian security forces.⁹

Since 2009, the Indian Navy has been deploying ships to Mauritius bi-annually to assist in patrolling the vast EEZ of the island country. The joint patrolling focuses on preventing piracy and illegal fishing and help reinforce maritime security in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Mauritius. These deployments have added to the special bonding that exists between India and Mauritius and contribute to maritime security in the Indian Ocean region.¹⁰ India has also been actively involved with the regional organisation IORA. The Secretariat of IORA is situated in Mauritius, which is also one of the founder members of IORA. It was in 2011 that IORA, in its Council of Ministers meeting under the chairmanship of India, identified six priority areas of cooperation. These are maritime safety and security; trade and investment facilitation; fisheries management; disaster risk reduction; academic and S&T cooperation; and tourism promotion and cultural exchanges.¹¹ The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an Indian initiative, was founded in 2008. It seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean Region. SAGAR was also important for India to be an effective 'a net maritime security provider'.¹²

Modi's visit was a watershed in the manner in which a holistic approach was articulated regarding maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean. SAGAR stressed the economic, security, and technological aspects; the bilateral and regional mechanisms of cooperation; and civilian and uniformed naval personnel interaction. It sought to convey that every Indian Ocean littoral country had an important role to play in ensuring safety and security of the waters of the Indian Ocean. Most important was the message that India seeks to ensure safety and security in the Indian Ocean Region through a shared security architecture. At the same time, SAGAR prioritised 'maritime security' in India's bilateral relations with Mauritius.

Regarding Mauritius relations with China, it is seen that diplomatic relations between them were established in 1972. Mauritius itself had achieved independence in March 1968. The two countries cooperate in the field of trade, economic and technological cooperation. China has helped Mauritius to build infrastructure such as a stadium, bridges, an airport terminal, amongst other projects. The two countries also have a vibrant cultural cooperation and Chinese tourists travel to Mauritius in substantial numbers. High level bilateral visits take place between the two countries and China looks upon Mauritius as a bridge to route its investment into Africa. Mauritius supports Beijing's 'One China Policy', while China supports Mauritius's sovereignty claims over the Chagos islands.¹³

Mauritius Prime Ministers Visit to India in May 2017

India-Mauritius relations further deepened with Mauritius Prime Minister's visit to India in May 2017. Four agreements were concluded. These included cooperation among specific research institutions in both the countries in the fields of oceanography, marine resources etc; an MoU to set up a Civil Services College in Mauritius; an agreement on maritime security; the submission by Mauritius of the instrument of ratification of the International Solar Alliance; and an agreement on a US\$500 million Line of Credit from India to Mauritius to help in implementing priority projects of Mauritius.

The Agreement on Maritime Security will ensure that close cooperation between the two countries would be further strengthened. This would help in responding to not only the conventional threats but also the non-conventional challenges like the trafficking of drugs and humans; illegal fishing; piracy that impacts trade and tourism; and other forms of illegal exploitation of marine resources. During this visit, Pravind Jugnauth said, "The acquisition of offshore patrol vessels and fast interceptor boats have enhanced the capacity of our police and national coast guards to patrol and protect our maritime zones. We also appreciate the training dispensed to our police personnel which have enhanced their skills".¹⁴ India and Mauritius also agreed to further strengthen their wide-ranging cooperation in hydrography for a secure and peaceful maritime domain. A decision to renew the life of the Coast Guard Ship Guardian, through a grant assistance program to Mauritius was also taken.

In less than three months of the Mauritius Prime Ministers visit to India, the Indian built Water Jet Fast Patrol Vessel CGS Valiant was commissioned, on 16 August 2017. Speaking on this occasion, the Mauritius Prime Minister recalled the commissioning of Coast Guard ship Barracuda in March 2015; the induction, in March 2016, of ten fast interceptor boats; the commissioning of a new Dornier aircraft; and the commissioning in December 2016 of CGS Victory and two Chetak helicopters. He further added that the commissioning of CGS Valiant was part of a strategy to build the capability of the Mauritius National Coast Guard on a three-pronged approach of detection, deterrence and interception; and that at the same time, the NCG must be able to protect people at sea with state-of-the-art capabilities in search and rescue.

In the above context, it is significant to note that on 10 December 2016, the commissioning ceremony of the state-of-the-art ship, CGS Victory, and two Chetak helicopters acquired by the Mauritius Police Force/National Coast Guard took place in Mauritius in the presence of Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth, and the Defence Minister of

India, Manohar Parrikar. On this occasion, Anerood Jugnauth said, “Our Exclusive Economic Zone and territorial waters, our surrounding islands, national interests and security imperatives, regional commitments, and an extremely dynamic geostrategic environment are giving rise to many challenges.” He said that the new acquisitions would better equip the Mauritius Police Force and the National Coast Guard (NCG) to meet the emerging challenges in the maritime security environment, especially taking into account the vast expanse of ocean that surrounds Mauritius. He further added that India would assist Mauritius in an integrated development project known as the ‘Trident Project’, which would cater for appropriate infrastructure and facilities and would involve the construction of a new NCG headquarters at Fort William, upgrading of repair facilities for the NCG vessels, and the construction of a dry dock facility with flotilla-support services.¹⁵

Manohar Parrikar reiterated India’s commitment to augmenting the capability of the Mauritius Police Force, including in the critical area of search and rescue. He also underscored the need to work together to harness the untapped potential of the Ocean Economy sector in fisheries, aquaculture, renewable energy, seabed exploration, and marine biotechnology.

India’s engagement with Mauritius is spread over many areas. India has extended assistance to Mauritius in the field of human resource development, capacity building and capability enhancement. Development projects that India is associated-with include the Metro Express Project; a new Supreme Court building; the construction of some 1000 social housing units; and a state-of-the-art ENT hospital. India has also provided assistance in the IT sector of Mauritius, especially in the construction of the Cyber Tower. India has expressed its solidarity with Mauritius on all issues of importance, including on Chagos, at the UN and other multilateral fora.¹⁶

Conclusion

India-Mauritius engagement on maritime security has intensified in the last two years. This is a reflection of the realisation that unless maritime security is ensured, the economic opportunities that oceans offer cannot be tapped. However, SAGAR is all about a holistic approach to maritime cooperation and engagement. The two countries now need to focus on specific projects relating to Blue Economy which will directly benefit the socio-economic development of people.

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