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## The Voyage from Sagar to Mahasagar: Rewriting the Narrative in the Indian Ocean Region

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*The world is witnessing a paradigm shift in India's maritime domain and its consequent persuasion of renewed foreign policies. India's visions of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR have culminated in its commitments to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through various spheres of cooperation with countries around the IOR, especially Mauritius. The strong, cemented partnership between India and Mauritius is based on their shared history, culture, heritage and legacy. It continues to grow as India strives for an enhanced strategic partnership with the island nation. This paper addresses the bilateral relations between two countries of the Global South, India's engagements through the elevated policies of SAGAR to MAHASAGAR in reshaping and securing the IOR, and the prospects that lie ahead of both countries in their pursuit of interests and engagements.*

**Keywords:** *maritime, foreign policy, strategic partnership.*

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### INTRODUCTION

If I had to start the conventional way, I would quote Alfred Mahan for the  $n^{\text{th}}$  time while formulating a research paper on India's maritime endeavours and its consequent foreign policy expedients. Having said that, apart from being indoctrinated about the Indian Ocean Region

(IOR) and India's maritime policies through lectures and readings, my attendance at a few conferences and seminars on the Indo-Pacific Region has allowed me to understand its growing significance in recent times and all the contentions that accompany it. Therefore, I sincerely hope that this partially justifies my claim and line of arguments in pursuing the subject of India's Maritime Domain and Foreign Policy.

The arguments stated here elucidate India's relations with Mauritius and their partnership in securing the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) from strategic threats and Western dominance, which I believe can be labelled as neo-colonial ventures. India has been quite persuasive in maintaining strong relations with Mauritius from the Prime Minister's first visit in 2015 to his recent visit in March 2025 as the Chief Guest for the Mauritius National Day celebrations.<sup>1</sup> During Mr. Modi's historic visit in 2015, he had proposed the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) Vision for maritime security in the IOR.<sup>2</sup> The SAGAR policy was further elevated after a decade to the Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) to assert India as the net security provider in the region.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this paper examines India's voyage from Vision SAGAR to MAHASAGAR and provides a projection of what lies ahead for the bilateral relations between the two nations. One pertinent question that has been raised here is the surge in military investments in the African continent undertaken mainly by the P5 members of the UN Security Council, with India being a newer addition to the same.<sup>4</sup> Finally, India is rewriting the narrative in the IOR as it attempts to enhance its strategic partnerships and develop its maritime and foreign policies accordingly.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature that has been reviewed for writing this research paper has primarily been documents and briefings published by the Ministry of External Affairs concerning the bilateral

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<sup>1</sup> 'Narendra Modi looks forward to enhancing ties with Seychelles, Mauritius, Sri Lanka' *India Today* (09 March 2015) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/prime-minister-narendra-modi-seychelles-mauritius-sri-lanka-indian-ocean-region-243424-2015-03-09>> accessed 19 August 2025

<sup>2</sup> Harshit Kanodia, 'India's SAGAR Policy in the Indian Ocean Region' (*Extraordinarily Plenipotentiary Diplomatist*, 25 December 2020) <<https://diplomatist.com/2020/12/25/indias-sagar-policy-in-the-indian-ocean-region>> accessed 19 August 2025

<sup>3</sup> 'PM announces Mahasagar vision with Mauritius for maritime security, trade' *India Today* (13 March 2025) <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/prime-minister-narendra-modi-mahasagar-vision-mauritius-maritime-security-trade-navinchandra-ramgoolam-2692904-2025-03-13>> accessed 19 August 2025

<sup>4</sup> Sameer Bhattacharya, 'SAGAR to Mahasagar: India reinforces its role in the Indian Ocean' (*Observer Research Foundation*, 29 March 2025) <<https://www.orfonline.org/research/sagar-to-mahasagar-india-reinforces-its-role-in-the-indian-ocean>> accessed 19 August 2025

relations between India and Mauritius. Additionally, articles and opinion pieces published by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) have also been reviewed for the purpose of formulating the arguments in this paper.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative methodology has been adopted in order to obtain a thorough understanding of the deliberations raised in the research topic. The study relies primarily on secondary sources to develop its research methodology and further analysis of the paper. This method of inquiry enabled an in-depth understanding of India's maritime security and the adjacent foreign policy with special reference to Vision SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, and the country's partnership with the African island nation of Mauritius.

## **INDIA-MAURITIUS RELATIONS**

Two countries, two continents united by a common history of colonialism, have maintained a long-standing relationship that has progressively evolved over the years towards a more enhanced strategic partnership. India and Mauritius not only share the dark past of being the victims of colonial powers but are also connected by language, culture, heritage, kinship and values. This interconnectedness therefore supports Prime Minister Modi's statements when he regarded Mauritius as "mini India" and the African island nation being India's family.<sup>5</sup>

India's relations with Mauritius date back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Mahatma Gandhi visited the then-colony on his way to India from South Africa. During his stay, he connected with the Indo-Mauritian labourers of the colony and inspired them by emphasising three essential ideas of political empowerment, education and maintaining ties with India. We find these encounters listed in Gandhi's autobiography, "The Story of My Experiment with Truth", and later advocated for the horrific conditions of the Indo-Mauritians at the hands of the colonial masters during the nationalist struggle. Mauritius was as influenced by Gandhi as he was himself by the African nation. Consequently, Mauritius celebrates its National Day on March 12, coinciding with and commemorating the Dandi March.

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<sup>5</sup> Aishwarya Dutta, 'Modi and Mini India: India's growing bilateral ties with Mauritius and its dynamics' (*Modern Diplomacy*, 27 March 2025) <<https://modern diplomacy.eu/2025/03/27/modi-and-mini-india-indias-growing-bilateral-ties-with-mauritius-and-its-dynamics>> accessed 19 August 2025

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to the island a decade ago in 2015 was regarded as a "very special" visit when he re-established geopolitical ties between the two countries and propounded the vision SAGAR. Mr. Modi's "homecoming" visit in 2025 signalled a deepening bilateral relationship with the exalted vision of MAHASAGAR.

As a consequence of the aforementioned evidence of India's ties with Mauritius, it is only justified to assert that the two countries share a strong bond and a partnership that has stood the test of time. For many years, the African island nation has worked with India to strengthen its maritime capabilities. The Mauritian National Coast Guard leased a C-139 interceptor boat and its equipment from India two years after the Prime Minister's first visit. A technical agreement to exchange white shipping information and support Mauritius' maritime monitoring of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was signed by the Indian Navy and the Mauritius Coast Guard during Modi's 2025 visit. India has promised to contribute to frequent patrolling, hydrographic surveys, combined maritime surveillance and provide defence assets.

As a charitable endeavour and for Port Louis to discard its ancient nautical charts and produce new ones, the Indian Naval vessels had conducted various hydrographic and oceanographic surveys on behalf of the partner nation. For Mauritius, this kind of collaboration is essential in terms of its economy. Approximately 2.3 million square kilometres make up the nation's EEZ, of which an additional 400,000 square kilometres are shared with the Seychelles. Apart from seaside tourism, its blue economy employs more than 10,000 people and accounts for more than 10% of the country's GDP. Therefore, in order to successfully attract foreign investment in industries like port infrastructure, shipping, tourism, seafood, fisheries, aquaculture, underwater cultural assets and renewable energy, an overemphasis is laid on the blue economy.

Despite such claims, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing continues to be a major problem in Mauritius, resulting in depleting fish supplies, food insecurity, and damage to the marine environment. Since it is quite challenging to identify illicit foreign fishing vessels, Mauritius has taken the decision to employ artificial intelligence and satellite photography to achieve this. To fight piracy and illicit fishing, our country authorises and sends naval vessels to Mauritius to jointly monitor its EEZ.

India's partnership with Mauritius is not limited to the maritime and security domain. During times of crisis, India has been the 'First Responder' and provided Mauritius with medical aid

during the COVID-19 pandemic and humanitarian aid and relief during the Wakashio oil spill and in the aftermath of the Chido Cyclone in December 2024. Furthermore, India has assisted the island nation in various infrastructural development projects. As a part of the Special Economic Package, India granted Mauritius with 353 million USD for five priority projects, namely, the Supreme Court Building, Social Housing Project, a new ENT hospital, Metro Express Project and tablets for school children.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, India further extended 500 million USD as a Line of Credit for the Phase I and II of the Metro Express Project, 8 Mega Watt Solar Power Plant, a new Forensic Science Laboratory, a supply of gas-based incinerators and fire-fighting vehicles, and the National Archives and Library and the Mauritius Police Academy. Apart from these, new projects have also been initiated and are at various stages of their implementation.

Post the 2025 visit, in a press briefing, the Foreign Secretary mentioned an agreement that had been reached to repair the water pipelines in Mauritius using a line of credit for Rs 487 crore denominated in Indian rupees.<sup>7</sup> The State Bank of India has extended this Line of Credit, which is the first Indian rupee-based line of credit that the government has ever extended to a foreign nation. In terms of trade, India is one of the largest trading partners of Mauritius, and this partnership has only continued to grow. In 2021, India and Mauritius signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA), which further cemented trade relations between the two nations. Additionally, India has also made efforts to induct Mauritius to the global stage by inviting it as a special guest to the G20 summit and also championing for the African Union's incorporation into the same. The Prime Ministers of two countries of the Global South have shown extraordinary commitment towards a sustainable future and a secure Indian Ocean Region devoid of threats and hegemons in the region.

## **FROM VISION SAGAR TO MAHASAGAR**

The strategic locations of both India and Mauritius provide a fair justification for both countries' vision towards a protected and prosperous Indian Ocean Region. From Security and Growth for All in the Region to Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions,

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<sup>6</sup> 'When Mauritius prospers, India is the first to celebrate: Prime Minister Modi' *India News Network* (12 March 2025) <<https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/en/20250312/when-mauritius-prospers-india-is-the-first-to-celebrate-prime-minister-modi>> accessed 19 August 2025

<sup>7</sup> 'From SAGAR to MAHASAGAR: India's Strategic Evolution in the Indian Ocean Region' (*Indo-Pacific Studies Center*) <<https://www.indo-pacificstudiescenter.org/commentaries/india-mahasagar-initiative>> accessed 19 August 2025

India has reaffirmed its commitments and proclamations as the Net Security Provider in the region.

When SAGAR was introduced a decade back in 2015, the Prime Minister had emphasised on Mauritius being a crucial partner standing at an intersection of India's Neighbourhood First Policy, its commitment to the Global South, and the said Vision SAGAR. There exist five pillars of Vision SAGAR that were designed to enhance India's marine engagement. The first was Security Cooperation, which aimed to improve marine security through bilateral and multinational ties. The second strategy was trade and economic integration, which aimed to improve the blue economy's prospects with regional partners. Third, disaster management and capacity building, which included humanitarian aid and the development of maritime infrastructure. Fourth, the responsible use of marine resources is promoted by sustainable development. Lastly, infrastructure and connectivity which involves building ports and naval bases as well as offering digital services in the area. India aimed to establish itself as a net security provider in the IOR through SAGAR by extending naval aid, intelligence, and other assistance services to less developed nations like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius.

The Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR), launched in March 2025, expands India's horizon of ambitions in the IOR. Vision MAHASAGAR not only includes enhanced strategic partnerships but also renewed cooperation across the spheres of political exchanges, human resource development, space, climate change, health, economic endeavours through trade, technology, capacity building measures and people-to-people ties.

Current commitments under MAHASAGAR encompass the provision of electric buses, the advancement of Agalega Island, the replacement of water pipelines, and the construction of a new Parliament building alongside the reconstruction of Ganga Talao. Drawing from Vision SAGAR, infrastructural development continues to be a fundamental component, with India endorsing various developmental and welfare projects, including the Metro Express, ENT Hospital, housing units, and social welfare initiatives. In the sphere of human resource development, India has promised to offer continued help through specialised training programmes, institutional links, and deputation of specialists, with an emphasis on civil service, health, customs, and legal administration. Space cooperation includes proposals for the India-

Mauritius satellite, disaster preparedness systems, and collaboration under the QUAD framework for climate monitoring. The two heads of state emphasised a high priority on using the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA), local currency trade settlements and encouraging Indian investment into emerging industries like fintech and the blue economy.

Digital cooperation centred on cybersecurity, e-governance system implementation, the introduction of Unified Payment Interface (UPI), Rupay cards and archive digitisation have also been established. With India reiterating help in safeguarding Mauritius's Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), providing assets, performing cooperative surveillance, and constructing the Agalega base, defence and maritime cooperation developed as a fundamental area under MAHASGAR. India also promised to support the Mauritian police force through capacity-building measures and the establishment of a National Maritime Information Sharing Centre.

Furthermore, India pledged cooperation through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, and other global coalitions. One significant step towards Mauritius' global presence was giving the island nation significant support on the Chagos Archipelago issue, which resulted in the UK handing over the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago islands to Mauritius. Expanding Jan Aushadhi Kendras, creating a Digital Health Office, working together on AYUSH systems, and developing curricula with NCERT are examples of health and education cooperation between the two nations. India also committed support in drug de-addiction and rehabilitation activities in the island nation. Lastly, diaspora involvement, religious tourism, indenture record preservation, and labour mobility collaboration are some of the responsibilities being undertaken by both countries towards cultural and people-to-people ties. India has cemented its position as a net security provider and a strategic partner in the region through its voyage from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR and is successfully rewriting the narrative.

## **THE SURGE IN MILITARY INVESTMENTS IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENT**

The growing significance of the IOR has attracted attention from all across the globe, especially from the P5 member states. From the formation of the UK-US military base in Diego Garcia to 'String of Pearls', there has been a surge in military investments and establishments in and around the African continent. The Chinese installation of a military base in Djibouti through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017 is perceived as a threat to the security apparatus in the

region and to Indian territory. China's incursions in the region and its consequent territorial threat are congenital to its expansionist tendencies. India too joined this club when it assisted Mauritius in developing the new runway and jetty at Agalèga. The news agency Al Jazeera, in an article published in 2021, claimed the development of an airstrip and jetty on a remote Mauritian island pointed towards India's ambitions as a rising superpower trying to flex its muscles. Consequently, there were speculations and enquiries concerning India's plans regarding Agalèga and whether or not it would be another Diego Garcia. These claims have been denied by both the Indian and the Mauritian governments, but the question persists and requires urgent addressing.

## **TOWARDS A STRATEGIC FUTURE**

India has emerged as a leader of the Global South through its policy formulations of Security and Growth for All in the Region to Mutual (SAGAR) and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth for All Across the Region (MAHASAGAR). Furthering the argument, such policy endeavours allow India to trade in INR instead of the universal denomination for trade, i.e. USD, introduce Rupay and UPI through digital cooperation and enhance strategic partnerships. The two countries greatly benefit from maintaining pivotal and cooperative relations across various domains with each other and plan on continuing the same in the future. Therefore, in addition to elevating India's maritime security policies and diplomatic strategies, India's ties with Mauritius and its assistance to the country mirror India's ambitions of being a global power.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper highlights India's expanding engagements with Mauritius across maritime security, trade, development, innovation, and education. India envisions a cooperative Indian Ocean Region (IOR) driven by South–South partnerships and inclusive growth. The evolution from Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) to Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions (MAHASAGAR) marks India's shift from a regional stakeholder to a decisive net security provider, with Mauritius serving as a key partner in this transformation.

The India–Mauritius partnership reflects how strategic cooperation and shared heritage can translate into effective diplomacy. India's contributions in defence, blue economy, digital

integration, and climate resilience reveal its commitment to regional stability and sustainable growth. Initiatives under IORA, CECPA, and developmental projects such as Agalega and Metro Express exemplify a balanced approach, combining strategic depth with human-centric progress. India's collaboration with Mauritius embodies its broader Indo-Pacific vision, one that prioritises connectivity over competition and cooperation over confrontation. The SAGAR-MAHASAGAR framework thus reinforces India's position as a responsible maritime power and a voice of the Global South, dedicated to ensuring a secure, prosperous, and equitable Indian Ocean Region.