

Situating Mauritius in India's Broader Oceanic Strategy

Written by Raghvendra Kumar

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RAGHVENDRA KUMAR, MAR 21 2025

The recent visit of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Mauritius on 11–12 March 2025 comes at a crucial time when the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region is witnessing heightened instability and conflict. It marks a significant milestone in India's oceanic outreach, aimed at fostering a stable and prosperous region through holistic maritime security, which serves as an enabler for sustainable development and growth. In this context, Mauritius is central to India's strategic maritime engagement and remains a key strategic partner, serving as a security hub, trade link, and diplomatic ally in the WIO region. It was in Mauritius that PM Modi first unveiled the maritime vision SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) in 2015, and on its 10th anniversary, the vision has evolved into MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). This evolution underscores India's commitment to regional stability and positions Mauritius at the heart of India's Arc of Security and Growth fostering a holistically secure and prosperous Indian Ocean region.

With around 70% of Mauritians of Indian origin, India enjoys deep historical and cultural ties with the country, transcending geopolitical boundaries. India has consistently supported Mauritius' claim over the Chagos Archipelago while maintaining friendly relations with both the UK and the USA, underscoring its multi-alignment and strategic autonomy in matters of core national interest. Whereas Mauritius has consistently stood with India at various international and regional forums, reflecting their shared interests, historical ties, and strategic alignment.

For India, the stakes are high. The WIO sits at the strategic crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe, and any instability in the region directly impacts India's trade, investments, security, and livelihoods. What makes this even more alarming is the increasing spillover of conflicts into the maritime domain. The WIO is at the core of India's maritime security strategy, given its critical role in trade, energy security, and strategic stability. With over 90% of India's trade and 90% of its hydrocarbon needs transported by sea, the WIO serves as India's most vital maritime corridor, facilitating more than 50% of its total sea-borne trade and around 40% of crude oil and 70% of natural gas supplies transiting through WIO. This makes the region central to India's economic and energy security, reinforcing the need to secure maritime routes across the wider WIO as an economic and strategic imperative. Moreover, the region is home to a large Indian diaspora, with approximately 8.7 million in West Asia and 3 million in Africa, contributing over US\$30 billion in annual remittances (3.3% of India's GDP). This further underscores the economic and strategic significance of the WIO for India.

However, the WIO remains a high-risk maritime space, where political instability, weak governance structures, economic disparities, and sectarian tensions contribute to a fragile security environment. These vulnerabilities create fertile ground for non-state actors and transnational organized crime networks to thrive, posing direct threats to India's national security, energy security, and economic interests.

For instance, the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) faces a complex web of security threats that directly impact regional stability and India's strategic interests. Since November 2023, over 100 Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, using drones, missiles, and unmanned surface vessels (USVs), have disrupted free passage, forcing ships to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope—a challenge further exacerbated by instability in Mozambique. The 1993 Mumbai blasts (where RDX was smuggled through the WIO) and the 2008 Mumbai attacks (where terrorists infiltrated Indian territory via the WIO) demonstrated how state-sponsored maritime terrorism blurs the lines between traditional and non-traditional security threats. This makes coastal security a pressing concern, especially as several terror outfits (Al-Shabaab-

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Somalia) and ASWJ/IS-Mozambique) continue to destabilize the region. Given that the WIO has already served as a conduit for terrorist operations against India, continuous monitoring and vigilance by security agencies in the region is more critical than ever.

Additionally, piracy is resurging, with more than 10–12 hijackings reported last year, posing significant risks to maritime trade and regional stability. Beyond conflict, transnational organized crime is on the rise, often fuelling armed conflicts. The WIO lies along the infamous southern route also known as the “heroin highway” or “smack track,” where drug networks actively destabilize economies and societies. The situation is so severe that Seychelles has declared a heroin epidemic, with 10% of its population addicted, whereas in Mauritius 7.4% of adults (between the age of 18-59 years) are addicted to drugs. India, too, is affected—in 2024 alone, security agencies seized 7,000 kg of narcotics worth \$5–6 billion, highlighting the magnitude of the threat that is aimed to destabilise economy and society and fund terror operations. Another growing concern is Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, which costs around US\$142.8 million of potential income loss annually. China's Distant Water Fleet (DWF), with over 17,000 vessels operating in the WIO, is a major contributor, accounting for 54.7% of global IUU fishing fleets. This not only threatens coastal livelihoods and food security but also fuels regional instability pushing affected populations towards illicit activities. Given these escalating challenges, securing the WIO is not merely an option—it is an absolute necessity.

Mauritius sits at a critical crossroads in global politics, strategically positioned along the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and key chokepoints of the Indian Ocean, through which the bulk of energy shipments and global trade flows. This geographical advantage makes Mauritius increasingly significant—strategically, economically, militarily, environmentally, and developmentally. However, like other island states, Mauritius faces asymmetries in size, economy, and capabilities. Despite these constraints, security concerns create a strong basis for bilateral and multilateral engagements between Port Louis and New Delhi, aligning their interests with those of India. For India, Mauritius provides strategic depth in the region, ensuring the unhindered maritime flow of trade and resources during peacetime and the ability to interdict adversaries in times of conflict. On the other hand, small island states are fighting for their survival, as was evident in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2022, where Mauritius' Prime Minister, Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, addressed the dire implications of climate change and related security issues for small island states. He stated:

For small island developing states like Mauritius, climate change is not a distant threat—it is an immediate reality that jeopardizes our very existence. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events threaten our land, our people, and our livelihoods. These are not abstract challenges; they are a matter of survival.

This underscores how vulnerable these nations are to non-traditional security threats, ranging from piracy and IUU fishing to marine pollution and climate change. The maritime domain is crucial for island states, not only for national security but also for economic, food, and environmental security. Their core national interest is to leverage oceanic resources for sustainable economic growth through a thriving blue economy, which must be developed in a secure and environmentally sustainable manner. However, capacity and capability constraints limit their ability to effectively harness the vast blue wealth at their disposal, making cooperation, collaboration, coordination, capacity building, and information sharing essential.

Mauritius, in particular, stands out among African nations for its democratic credentials, best ease of doing business in Africa and 13th in world, sound human rights record, and one of the wealthiest countries in Africa with low levels of corruption, making it an attractive economic and strategic partner (as highlighted in the US Government Integrated Country Strategy, 2022). Over the years, Mauritius has emerged as a regional financial hub and a gateway to Africa continent, playing a crucial role in facilitating investment and trade across the wider WIO region. Meanwhile, India's historical and cultural ties with island states make it a natural maritime partner, seen as a benevolent and non-threatening power. India's reputation as a “preferred security partner” and “first responder in regional crises” further strengthens these partnerships.

India's engagement with Mauritius is driven by the need to enhance security and build capacity, both of which are essential for maintaining regional stability. The WIO serves as India's arc of security and growth, offering significant

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energy, trade, and economic opportunities. Thus, ensuring stability in this region is crucial, as instability has direct economic consequences. According to the World Bank, regional instability can reduce GDP growth by 2-3%, whereas conflict zones can experience a 30-40% decline in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). A secure WIO is, therefore, vital for India's developmental agenda, energy security, industrial growth, and global market access. This underscores why India must remain actively engaged with small island states, as their role in shaping the region's stability is critical to safeguarding New Delhi's national, regional, and global interests.

India's oceanic strategy prioritises constructive engagement, balancing security and cooperation to ensure sustainable development. This vision is realised through SAGAR, which has now evolved into MAHASAGAR—two key initiatives shaping India's maritime outreach in the wider region. SAGAR serves as a guiding vision for India's maritime engagement, focusing on security cooperation, economic development, capacity building, and regional connectivity. The evolved and renewed vision of MAHASAGAR aims at holistic maritime security, acting as an enabler for sustainable economic growth while bridging capacity gaps for both large and small island nations, as well as coastal states in the region and beyond. It seeks to build a stable and prosperous region based on the principle of "equity in development" and expands upon SAGAR by integrating capacity building and capability enhancement, climate resilience, digital connectivity, the blue economy, defence cooperation and mutual security for a shared future.

MAHASAGAR thus forms the foundation of India's DIME strategy—Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic engagement tools—through which India advances its vision of a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indian Ocean region. To put this strategy into action, India actively partners with like-minded nations like Mauritius and participates in several multilaterals groupings, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, Indian Ocean Commission, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and Djibouti Code of Conduct-Jeddah Amendments (DCoC-JA), G-20 amplifying the voice of the Global South and fostering deeper cooperation to address shared challenges and advance common goals. As part of these efforts, India focuses on developing the maritime policing and governance capabilities of island nations like Mauritius, ensuring they can effectively secure their vast ocean territories. A stable and secure Indian Ocean is not only in Mauritius' interest but also in India's core national interest, as instability in the region directly affects trade, energy security, and territorial integrity.

Against this backdrop, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mauritius (March 11–12, 2025), India and Mauritius elevated their ties to an Enhanced Strategic Partnership, reinforcing cooperation in politics, the economy, defence, and development. This upgrade reflects their shared goals of regional stability and prosperity. The joint vision also highlights the development of a new runway and jetty on Agalega Island with Indian assistance, emphasising their critical role in providing emergency humanitarian aid, particularly following Cyclone Chido. Mauritius expressed gratitude for India's timely support, which included deploying aircraft and ships, reinforcing India's position as a 'First Responder' for Mauritius. Additionally, "Mauritius welcomed India's ongoing assistance in Agalega's development, aimed at improving the welfare and well-being of its inhabitants". India also supports Mauritius' shared commitment to a free, open, secure, and safe Indian Ocean and assists in securing its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This includes aiding the Coast Guard in maritime capacity building and enhancing capabilities in the defence sector by providing military assets such as Dornier aircraft, Dhruv helicopters, and patrol boats, as well as establishing the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS).

Additionally, India trains Mauritian personnel in counter-terror operations, conducts joint naval exercises to bolster the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), and engages in anti-piracy operations and measures against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Furthermore, India plans to develop security infrastructure by establishing a Police Academy and a National Maritime Information Sharing Centre in Mauritius. The two countries also signed agreements to cooperate in various security sectors, extending to white shipping, the blue economy, and hydrography.

On the economic front, India and Mauritius signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) in 2021 for strengthening trade in pharmaceuticals, textiles, and medical devices, with bilateral trade reaching \$851.13 million in FY 2023–24. Mauritius remains a key source of FDI for India (\$177 billion since 2000), facilitated by the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA). Both nations have agreed to trade in Indian

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Rupee and Mauritian Rupee, reducing reliance on foreign exchange reserves. India also supports infrastructure development in Mauritius, including projects such as the Metro Express, Supreme Court, ENT Hospital, and housing developments. In 2025, India committed to constructing Mauritius' new Parliament, symbolizing democratic collaboration, as well as a 100-km water pipeline and community development projects worth 500 million MUR.

The newly inaugurated Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute will enhance the capabilities of Mauritian personnel through public service training, with 500 Mauritian civil servants set to receive training in India over the next five years to improve administrative competencies. India continues its ITEC training, digital cooperation (UPI, RuPay), AI-space research for climate resilience, and hydrographic surveys linked to maritime domain awareness for the sustainable exploitation of blue wealth.

Mauritius is not just a bilateral partner but a special strategic node in India's broader oceanic strategy, reinforcing the country's role as a key stakeholder in the evolving security and economic architecture of the Indian Ocean. The constructive transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR marks a strategic shift, addressing contemporary challenges across security, trade, climate resilience, and capacity-building. Modi's visit reaffirms India's commitment to fostering a stable, secure, and prosperous Indian ocean region, with Mauritius as a central pillar of this vision given its strategic geography and historical linkages. Looking ahead, deepening cooperation in emerging domains such as undersea-digital and critical infrastructure, deep sea mission, and regional governance will further cement India-Mauritius ties, ensuring that the partnership remains dynamic, future-ready, and responsive to shared aspirations.

About the author:

Dr Raghvendra Kumar holds a PhD from the University of Delhi, specializing in Indian Ocean geopolitics and maritime affairs. Previously he worked as an Associate Fellow at National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi and has also taught at Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. His areas of interest include African Affairs, Indian Ocean studies, and maritime security studies.