

INDIA'S GROWING SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN INDO-PACIFIC: A CASE STUDY OF INDO-MAURITIUS CONVERGENCE

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the role of Mauritius in India's Asia-Pacific policy facing the new threat of China's rise in the Indian-Pacific Ocean. Therefore, by utilizing empirical data, the analysis will remain qualitative in nature based on the explanatory approach, and the framework of critical realism in International Relations. The results of the study suggest that realism has an intrinsic bias towards the Great Powers study which argues that smaller countries have less choice in terms of strategy and can only survive as satellite states for the larger powers. Despite his small power status, geography and shared heritage of kinship, culture, and language helped Mauritius occupy a central position in India's Indo-Pacific policy. In short, India's engagement with Mauritius is based on expanding India's reach, interest, and focus to subvert China's assertiveness in the Indian-Pacific Ocean.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami peran Mauritius dalam kebijakan Asia-Pasifik India menghadapi ancaman baru kebangkitan Tiongkok di Samudera Hindia-Pasifik. Oleh karena itu, dengan memanfaatkan data empiris, analisisnya akan tetap bersifat kualitatif berdasarkan pendekatan eksplanatori, dan kerangka realisme kritis dalam Hubungan Internasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa realisme memiliki bias intrinsik terhadap studi Kekuatan Besar yang berpendapat bahwa negara-negara kecil memiliki lebih sedikit pilihan dalam hal strategi dan hanya dapat bertahan sebagai negara satelit untuk kekuatan yang lebih besar. Meskipun status kekuasaannya kecil, geografi dan warisan bersama kekerabatan, budaya, dan bahasa membantu Mauritius menempati posisi sentral dalam kebijakan Indo-Pasifik India. Singkatnya, keterlibatan India dengan Mauritius didasarkan pada perluasan jangkauan, minat, dan fokus India untuk menumbangkan ketegasan Tiongkok di Samudra Hindia-Pasifik.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the Indo-Pacific has emerged as an important maritime space influencing global politics and the larger maritime security architecture. This region is crucial in the sense that maritime and strategic interests of global powers are vested within it. The rise of China across the Indian and the Pacific Ocean along with new threats radiating from the maritime domain further consolidates the necessity of maritime security. Today the Indo-Pacific region represents the geo-strategic reality of the twenty-first century (Baruah, 2020). India, Japan, the United States, Australia, and other major powers are paying close attention to Indo-Pacific region in order to offset China's ambition and preserve their marine interests (Baruah, 2020). Finally, engaging in multilateral and multi-sectoral dialogue with global powers such as Australia, Japan, the United States under the ambit of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly called the Quad. Under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, India attempts

bilateral or multilateral dialogues in the Indo-Pacific region (Saha & Mishra, 2020). Agendas include from maritime security, maritime connectivity to capacity building. MEA has also created a separate Oceania division to focus on South-East Asian nations, Pacific Island states, and the larger Indo-Pacific to maintain maritime dominance and reduce Chinese control over the region (Roche, 2020). Since PM Modi's government came into power under the ambit of India's Act East policy and Act West policy, the Indo-Pacific region became the cornerstone of India's Foreign Policy.

PM Modi announced The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) during the 14th East Asian Summit in 2019 complements India's SAGAR mission. India is attempting to build stronger maritime cooperation with major powers and littoral states in the Indo-Pacific with the help of IPOI. IPOI comes under the broader framework of India's Act East Policy with a particular focus on intelligence and connectivity sharing with the ASEAN countries. IPOI focuses on two pivotal issues that are of paramount importance for India's Maritime Security. Firstly, discerning Chinese

hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, IPOI calls for multilateral dialogue regarding issues of maritime security. It includes all the countries of ASEAN, littoral powers such as Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, etc. along with the member countries of the Quad. Secondly, IPOI expects greater connectivity, security, and maritime intelligence sharing among the stakeholders of the region.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper examines and evaluates the Realist stance on small littoral states and their position in global power discourse. Generally, realism in International Relations and in foreign policy making has an intrinsic bias toward the study of great powers. However after the end of Cold War, the concept of power has shifted from the material dimensions to non-material one (Galal, 2020). Consequently the foreign policies of small states have been affected by such shift. Realist has perceived that small states are more vulnerable to external shocks and dangers. Therefore, the study of small powers in global politics can only be possible and desirable only in the context of their interactions with

great powers. Considering the nation-state is the essential unit in global politics, realism has identified how those large and resourceful states have maintained their dominance in global politics by the means of strategic partnership, demand, and coercion (Gleason, Kerimbekova, & Kozhirova, 2008). On the contrary smaller states have fewer options when it comes to strategy. The best small states can do is to be satellite states to the great powers (Galal, 2020). However, the forces of globalization and with the fundamental normative shifts in the international system we began to witness proliferation of small states (Alesina & Spolaore, 2003 as cited in Long, 2017). Contrary to the realist doctrine of satellite states, small states after the Cold War are very active in international organizations and influencing global norms (Goetschel, 1998; Thorhallsson, 2010; Panke, 2011; He, 2016; Ingebritsen, 2002 as cited in Long, 2017). Hence, in the Post-Cold War era the small states can become an important player in global politics on the basis of its geo-political and geo-economic leverages. Similarly this newfound interest in littoral powers such as Mauritius is associated

with Western and India's security and strategic threats from China. Unlike before Mauritius is considering every opportunity for foreign investments even it goes against Western interests. Therefore despite its small power such Mauritius is going to play a key role in the maritime power politics among great powers in the Asia-Pacific region. This assumption is becoming true considering a series of infrastructure initiatives by China alongside its "One Belt, One Road" initiative. In short both India and the West cannot take the Mauritius for granted keeping in mind Mauritius now have more diplomatic and economic options with China.

RESEARCH METHODS

The important aspect of bilateral relations in global politics is to uncover the pertinent issues of foreign relations. In this aspect the trajectory of bilateral relations can help us to explore the potentials and challenges of that bilateral engagement. Hence complete understandings of the available sources are required to consider both theoretical and practical feasibility of conducting the study. This study will try to understand the role of Mauritius in India's Asia-Pacific policy utilizing

empirical data, but the analysis will remain qualitative in nature based on explanatory approach. Existing literature, both primary and secondary sources, e-resources, and news articles on this topic above have used extensively to understand the trajectory as well the future direction of this relationship between India and Mauritius.

For India, small powers such as Mauritius are pivotal to strategic balance with China in the Indo-Pacific. Using littoral powers India is in the process of actively extending its reach, interests, and focus to subvert Chinese assertiveness. The objective of this paper is to understand the changing trajectory of India's Indo-Pacific policy with special reference to Mauritius. To provide answers to the pertinent issues of India's Indo-Pacific policy, this paper is divided into two subsections. First to provide an overview of changes and continuities of India's Indo-Pacific policy followed by locating small littoral states such as Mauritius in India's broader maritime framework.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

India's Indo-Pacific policy: A Brief Genesis

Japanese ex-prime minister Shinzo Abe in his parliament address in 2007 described the Indo-Pacific region as the Confluence of the Two Seas (Paskal, 2021). Since then, India has adopted a proactive Indo-Pacific policy and focuses on strengthening its maritime and naval capacity. This paradigm shift in India's maritime diplomacy is evident through the creation of an Indo-Pacific division, the Indian Ocean Rim Association. Additionally, India started utilizing ASEAN and the Quad forums for multilateral discussion on issues about maritime security and geo-strategy. However, at the initial phase, India lacked a comprehensive Indo-Pacific policy. But mounting concerns about China's expansionism in the Indo-Pacific made India's defence and security experts accommodate diverse interests related to maritime security. Repetitive India-China land skirmishes compelled Indian policymakers to be vocal against Chinese aggression both on territorial and maritime space.

Since India's independence, Indian foreign policymakers were more concerned about territorial threats

because of the security challenges emancipated from India's adjoining neighbour Pakistan. Thus, the Maritime domain was largely ignored at the initial phase. However, the 2008 Mumbai attacks made India's strategic community aware of potential threats from sea routes (Paskal, 2021). Additionally, India is now a global exporter, and the majority of India's goods pass-through seas. So, it becomes necessary for India to protect and secure its maritime space. India has been disconcerted by increased Chinese maritime activity in the Indo-Pacific region which India perceives as dual-use to carry on Chinese military and commercial (Paskal, 2021).

India and the Quad

The Quad occupies a central position in Indo-Pacific policy. With the recent resurgence of the Quad, all the member countries aspire to use this forum for greater economic interactions and to maintain peace in maritime space. India, like many other global powers, is worried about Chinese supply chains developing in the Indo-Pacific region and Chinese growing bonhomie with the ASEAN nations. So, India attempts to use

forums like IOR and the Quad to let the global community understand Chinese hegemonic ambitions in the region. There is another reason behind India's proactivist in the Quad. Unlike China, India's maritime capacities are limited (Paskal, 2021). Thus, multilateral engagement is a necessity for India to protect India's interests in the region, specifically securing Andaman and Nicobar Islands from external threats. Until recently, India had dealt its maritime space with uncertainty and depended upon foreign intelligence. However, that noticeably changed following the border conflict with China, popular anti-Chinese sentiment, and negative economic growth due to Covid-19 all of these factors turned India strongly against China (Paskal, 2021). Similarly, many ASEAN countries are also worried about the Chinese aggressive posture in the Indo-Pacific notably after Chinese actions in the South China Sea conflict. So, from a defence and strategic perspective, ASEAN countries also want to shift away from China. Utilizing this growing Chinese apathy, India wants to use multilateral forums to initiate dialogue with the ASEAN nations. So,

India's ultimate objectives are securing economic and geo-strategic interests.

Because of this Indo-Pacific partnership in defence and trade are much more important and urgent for India (Paskal, 2021). Under the Quad forum, India has increased its maritime outreach to develop a multi-sectoral partnership with India's Indo-Pacific partners. In 2020, India and Australia signed a declaration on comprehensive strategic partnership. This agreement complements India's Indo-Pacific vision and Australia's Indo-Pacific approach. Under this agreement, both countries have vowed to maintain an open, free, rules-based Indo-Pacific region supported by inclusive global and regional institutions (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). Even though India's security focus has been largely land-based, it would be wrong to assume Indian policymakers are not aware of the geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific. Under India's Act East Policy, the Indian Naval forces are given paramount importance to gather and share intelligence as well conduct routine maritime exercises. Over the years India's maritime activities increased profoundly. Today India

caters to maritime awareness, multilateral partnership with the Quad and ASEAN members. The Indian navy along with the US, Japan, Australia, Myanmar, Vietnam is ensuring interoperability in the Indo-Pacific via joint exercises (Paskal, 2021). India has also indulged in logistics partnerships with the US, Oman, Singapore, South Korea, and Indonesia (Paskal, 2021). But most importantly India is developing cordial relationships with small littoral states. Maintaining good relationships with such states is pivotal for India as they are more prone to Chinese debt diplomacy. To counter China, India has offered defence lines of credit for Vietnam, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Bangladesh and to build naval capabilities of Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Mauritius (Paskal, 2021). All such ventures are helping India to build goodwill with the small and medium powers.

India-Mauritius Relations: A Growing Bonhomie

In India's, Indo-Pacific policy littoral states occupy a key position due to their geostrategic positioning, resource capacity, and the existence of

the Indian diaspora community in such nations. Among them, Mauritius is an important partner among the Indian Ocean littoral countries in the region. India and Mauritius share rich cultural, historical, political, economic, military, social, and cultural affinities. Although diplomatic relations were established in 1948 after India's independence, Mauritius maintained contacts with India throughout its history (High Commission of India Port Louis, Mauritius, 2021). During the colonial rule, Indian workers migrated to Mauritius to work on sugar plantations followed by a huge influx of Indian workers in Mauritius as indentured laborers.

With Mauritius, India shares a special relation as the majority of Mauritius's population is of Indian origin. Even Mahatma Gandhi in his visit to South Africa made a brief stopover in Mauritius that is still etched in the consciousness of Mauritius. The National Day of Mauritius is celebrated on March 12 which was the day Gandhi started his Salt march campaign and every year Mauritius paid tribute to Gandhiji and the Indian freedom struggle (High Commission of India Port Louis, Mauritius, 2021). Yet, India

for a long-time neglected Mauritius as India's security priorities were limited to the land. Nonetheless, following the implementation of India's Act East Policy, Mauritius' geostrategic importance resurfaced in India's foreign policy. The Modi Government time and times again made it clear that India wants to further strengthen the partnership across the economic, health, and security spheres. During PM Modi's historical visit to Mauritius in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called India-Mauritius relations a special one that is deeply rooted in history. Both countries signed five important agreements to elevate the relationship to a new height. For the Modi's government, Mauritius is a part of a broader diplomatic strategy to counter China's influence in the Indian Ocean Region. During the visit, India offered US\$500 million as a line of credit for infrastructural development in Mauritius and both countries have agreed to transfer intelligence regarding conventional and non-conventional threats in the Indian Ocean while pursuing deeper economic opportunities. On the maritime security front, India pledged to build Agaléga Island to improve transport and

connectivity links. PM Modi also extended India's help for the construction of a second cyber city (Pleiter, 2015). So, in short Mauritius occupies a significant role in India's Indo-Pacific outlook. Under the aegis of India's Act East Policy, both countries started emphasizing deeper political interactions, development cooperation, defence and maritime partnership, and people to people linkages (Union Cabinet of India, 2021).

Political Relations

After the independence of Mauritius in 1968 then first Prime Minister and the Father of the Mauritian Nation Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam had highlighted the importance and centrality of India in Mauritius' foreign policy (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). Over the years Mauritian leadership and political elites have had a positive orientation towards India and lauded India's Non-Violence tactics of resolving conflicts. India was also among the very few countries who had organised an annual African summit to address the challenges of the African

nation and asked for the support of the global powers. Therefore mutual trust and Indian goodwill indeed play an important role in Indo-Mauritius political cooperation. Throughout the years various high level visits were done from both India and Mauritius to consolidate the bilateral relations. In 2012 Mauritian Prime Minister Navi Chandra Ramgoolam paid a four-day State Visit to India to sign five Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) in areas of S&T, education, sports and youth, textiles and for setting up of a hybrid planetarium at Rajiv Gandhi Science (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). Further to accelerate economic growth India has provided Mauritius an economic package comprising a Line of Credit of US\$ 250 million and a grant of US\$ 20 million (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). For a long time India's interaction with Mauritius remained dormant. However the official visit of Mauritius President Rajkeswur Purryag in 2013 has revived the political and diplomatic relations between the countries. To honour this visit the Indian government has conferred Pravasi Bharatiya Samman on him (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI,

2016). This visit was reciprocated by India with the official visit of then President Shri Pranab Mukherjee in 2013 and he was the Chief Guest at the Mauritius's 45th Independence Day celebrations. During this visit three Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were signed relating to health and medicine; persons with disabilities and senior citizens; and tourism were signed (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). In 2014 Mauritian Prime Minister Ravichandran Ramgoolam became the only non-SAARC leader to attend the swearing in ceremony of the new Government which was followed by the visit of then Indian External Affairs Minister Mrs (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). During this visit both countries had discussed Indian Naval Western Fleet Ships and a business meet was organised by Board of Investment and Mauritian Chamber of Commerce and inauguration of International Conference on Indentured Labour Route at Mahatma Gandhi Institute (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). In 2015 a Mauritian delegation headed by then Mauritian Vice Prime Minister Mr Showkutally Soodhun visited Gandhinagar, Gujarat and participated in the World Hindi

Day celebrations in New Delhi. However the historic visit of Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in 2015 was a watershed moment in the bilateral relations. PM Modi in this visit has commissioned the OPV Barracuda which was built by an Indian shipyard and financed by the Indian Government was given to the Mauritian Coast Guard (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). Furthermore PM Modi laid the construction works of the World Hindi Secretariat and five agreements in various areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, including Ocean Economy and Traditional Systems of Medicine, were signed (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). India had also provided a Line of Credit of USD 500 million to finance civilian infrastructure projects in Mauritius (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). In the third India-Africa Forum Summit both countries had extensive talks with regards to foreign investments and business tie ups. In short, high level visits between India and Mauritius are prominent in recent times which have highlighted the importance of Mauritius in India's Indo-Pacific agenda. Furthermore over

the years both countries have signed a wide range of bilateral agreements (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). Some prominent arrangements are listed here (Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, 2016). the Double Taxation Avoidance Convention (1982), Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (1998), Agreement on Cooperation in Information Technology (2000), MoU on Cooperation in Biotechnology (2002), Extradition Treaty (2003), MoU on Cooperation against Terrorism (2005), MoU on Cooperation in the field of Environment (2005), Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in Criminal Matters (2005), MoU Concerning Cooperation in the Exchange of Finance Intelligence Related to Money Laundering & Financing of Terrorism(2008), MoU on Science and Technology Cooperation (2012), MoU on Sports and Youth Affairs (2012), Educational Exchange Programme (2012), MOU on Textiles (2012), MoU on cooperation in MSME Sector (2013), MoU on Cooperation in Ocean Economy (2015), and MoU in the field of Traditional Systems of Medicine (2015).

Economic Relations

After China, India remains Mauritius' second-largest trading partner. India's current export to Mauritius accounts for USD 776 million while Mauritius exported USD 24 million worth of goods and services to India (High Commission of India Port Louis, Mauritius, 2021). Petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, grains, cotton, and other items are among India's key exports to Mauritius. Aluminium alloys, refined copper, light vessels, jewellery, etc. (High Commission of India Port Louis, Mauritius, 2021). Even though India enjoys good trade relations with Mauritius there are some issues of concern for India, specifically issues related to FDI inflows. India was once Mauritius' largest source of FDI which was later replaced by China. In 2017-18, India's FDI to Mauritius amounted to USD 15.94 billion that halved to USD 8.08 billion in 2018-19 (High Commission of India Port Louis, Mauritius, 2021). This is a glaring example of China's extensive reach and control over the Indo-Pacific. To counter the Chinese threat, India in 2021 signed The Comprehensive Economic and Commercial Partnership

Agreement with Mauritius during the visit of India's Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar (Indian Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2021). The focus of this agreement is to eliminate tariff duties on goods and services as India aims to overtake China and become the number one trade destination for Mauritius (Beri, 2021). Amidst China's mounting pressure in the African continent, The CECPA aims to provide a much-needed boost for India to augment intensive trade partnerships with other African countries. Along with Seychelles, Mauritius is part of India's larger ambition for the expansion of business opportunities into continental Africa (Beri, 2021).

India-Mauritius Defense and Strategic engagements

India-Mauritius Défense cooperation is an inseparable part of India's maritime diplomacy. Over the years India has strengthened its defence tie-ups with small island countries to advance India's geo-strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. Under the SAGAR doctrine, India is pursuing a proactive defence policy with the littoral states of Maldives, Sri Lanka,

Seychelles, and Mauritius (Rajagopal, 2020). Mauritius signed a defence agreement with India in 1974 which ensured Indian Naval assistance to the Mauritius Coast Guard and transfer of naval vessels and equipment to Mauritius. This agreement was followed by the India Air Force Show in Mauritius in 2004 and India handed over Hydrographic Survey Assistance to the Mauritius government in 2007 (Rajagopal, 2020). In 2011 India and Mauritius exchanged their coastal surveillance capabilities by setting up the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (Beri, 2021). This radar system benefitted both countries. It helps Mauritius to anti-piracy operations and secures itself from threats while it helps India to gather intelligence about sea routes in the Indo-Pacific. The CSRS is pivotal for Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean region. India has reached an agreement to assist the Mauritius navy to engage with the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard and procure Indian defence equipment at a low cost (Beri, 2021). Since 2015 The Modi government has elevated the defence relations between the two to a new height. In recent times India and Mauritius signed several

agreements in the defence realm. India has agreed to transfer Dornier aircraft and Dhruv on lease to Mauritius to monitor its extensive maritime zone (Beri, 2021). Additionally, India has also agreed to a \$100 million Line of Credit for the procurement of Indian defence equipment by Mauritius.

Such developments have made it clear of India's pro-activism to maintain the IOR region free from violence. Due to India's support in the defence front, Mauritius naval forces have strengthened their skills while keeping Chinese hegemonic ambition at bay.

Role of Mauritius in India's Indo-Pacific Agenda

Mauritius' geographical location as an Indo-Pacific pivot reinforces its importance in India's Indo-Pacific outlook. Like many other countries, India's essential supplies such as oil and crude products and shipments transit through the Indian Ocean which are close to Mauritius (Beri, 2021). So, India is making sure littoral transit routes remain under India's control and reduce their external dependency on China.

In 2015 during Prime Minister Modi's visit, he stressed deeper Indo-Mauritius ties to ensure safety, security, and peace in the Indian Ocean region (Beri, 2021). Under the SAGAR initiative, Mauritius and Seychelles are India's key partners. India is also expecting trilateral and multilateral economic and security cooperation with India's maritime neighbours.

As China has already expanded its control over African nations, India started reproaching African countries, particularly the Indian Ocean Region littoral states. To counter Chinese dominance India has launched several initiatives such as India-Africa Forum Summit, India-Africa Defence Ministers Conclave, etc. (Beri, 2021). Additionally, India has interacted with the Indo-Pacific countries through multilateral mechanisms such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (Beri, 2021).

Like its neighbouring countries, African nations and Indo-Pacific littoral states are also affected by Chinese aid diplomacy. China has invested substantively in infrastructural and connectivity projects in Africa and its Indian Ocean littorals (Beri, 2021).

Small Island states such as Mauritius and Seychelles have not been immune from this threat. Under China's One Belt One Road initiative China and Mauritius signed a Free Trade Agreement thus seriously manoeuvring the geostrategic equation of the Indo-Pacific (Beri, 2021). Even though India and Mauritius share cultural contiguity dating back to colonial times and a special partnership in recent years, India's approach towards littoral states has not been fully explored. That's why India needs to use Mauritius as a linked nation to deepen India's engagement with other island countries.

The issue of Diego Garcia and its impacts on Indo-China competition in Mauritius

In recent times both China and India have undertaken proactive policy measures in the Indian Ocean region which led to an intense competition for influence in the littoral states. This great power competition between India and China appears to be very complex and sharp in Mauritius, a small island nation lies 5,100 km. southwest of India's shores. Under India's 'Look Africa' initiative since 2014, India has intensified engagement and

cooperation with African nations via the annual India-Africa summits. The Chinese on the other hand, under the Belt and Road Initiative, have promised the African states infrastructure and developmental assistance by providing soft loans. In this context of Indo-China competition in Mauritius, the issue of Diego Garcia remains the most significant and problematic one (Asia Sentinel, 2018). During British rule Diego Garcia was part of a Mauritian dependency (Asia Sentinel, 2018). However, at the time of independence of Mauritius, Diego Garcia was annexed out of Mauritius. Later under the order of the British crown, Diego Garcia was included in the British Indian Ocean Territory. Exclusion of Diego Garcia was mainly done to maintain the naval power of the British sphere in maritime space. Since the independence of Mauritius, the country has applied for the inclusion of Chagos Archipelago, which includes Diego Garcia. In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly voted to send the matter to the International Court of Justice (Asia Sentinel, 2018). During the cold war at the heightened US-USSR rivalry, the entire population of Diego Garcia was forcibly moved

off and resettled to Mauritius and the Seychelles (Asia Sentinel, 2018). It was at that time the US took control of Diego Garcia and then built a huge naval base, throughout the cold war Diego Garcia has served as the command control centre of the US in the Asia Pacific region. Diego Garcia was constructed keeping in mind the growing USSR power in the Asian region. Therefore we can witness a state of art of technologies in Diego Garcia consists of two 3,700-meter runway, parking aprons for heavy bombers, 20 ship anchorages, a deep-water pier, port facilities for the largest naval vessels in the American or British fleet, aircraft hangars, maintenance buildings and an air terminal and a 1.3 million-barrel fuel storage area (Asia Sentinel, 2018).

Since Diego Garcia is a contested area between the US and Mauritius any such movements either from India or China will be counted as a threat to the US maritime dominance in the region. Till now both China and India have not intervened to resolve this issue on behalf of Mauritius therefore both countries have not adequate diplomatic and political confidence and support from the Mauritius government.

The Great Game between India & China in Mauritius

Unlike other littoral states, Mauritius is the most resource rich and internally stable of the independent states in the Indian Ocean. Today in this era of maritime confrontation between the great powers, the Asia-Pacific Ocean region is expected to be the epicentre of power struggle and global growth over the next decade. The Indo-Pacific region, particularly the Indian Ocean, is important in global politics as two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, a third of the bulk cargo and half of all container traffic passes through it (Asia Sentinel, 2018). That's why China under its ambitious string of pearls policy has attempted to control over the Indo-Pacific maritime space. China has already focused on connecting the strategic choke points of the Indian Ocean by connecting Gwadar port in Pakistan stretching towards Kyaukpyu in Myanmar (Asia Sentinel, 2018). Apprehending Chinese hegemonic aspirations, India on the other hand has attempted for a proactive stance by maintaining and developing reciprocal agreements with Australia, France and the U.S.

Therefore India wants to take full advantage of maritime spaces such as Cocos Islands in Australia and La Réunion in France (Asia Sentinel, 2018).

Amidst this growing power assertion between China, India and the western powers, the role of Mauritius is very pivotal as it's located in the strategic chokepoint in the Indo-Pacific region. Mauritius wants to use India for political stability and democratic government while China aims to provide further financial and structural assistance to the African powers. However, with the support of the US and the western media, India enjoys greater people and government support which needs to be utilized properly in order to control the assertiveness of China. Although India enjoys political and diplomatic support, Mauritius like other developing powers is left with no option but to embrace the Chinese debt diplomacy in order to improve its falling and decaying infrastructure. Therefore Mauritius in order to balance relations between the two superpowers is looking for an external power like the US who can guarantee the independence and autonomy of this littoral power.

Countering the Chinese Dominance in Mauritius: An Indian Perspective

Considering the growing threat of China both in territorial and in maritime space, India under the Modi government is focusing on the Indian Ocean by reviving the Indian Ocean as a geopolitical concept (Asia Sentinel, 2018). To cover up the grey areas of maritime security, India wants to rectify its previous mishappening of not sustaining healthy relations with the littoral powers despite India having a considerable diaspora in there. That's why both Seychelles and Mauritius are officially welcomed to join as guest countries in the NSA level meeting on trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2014 (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). Since then Mauritius and Seychelles have remained active in the existing maritime security cooperation arrangement of India. Furthermore, under the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative the bilateral ties between India and Mauritius are expected to increase more. Unlike China, India has always opted for friendly and transparent

maritime space, strict adherence to international maritime rules and norms and peaceful resolution of maritime security issues which also coincide with Mauritius aspirations. Because of this shattered value and mutual trust India was allowed to develop infrastructure in Mauritius in 2015. Such initiatives indeed have opened up new opportunities for India to increase and strengthen its naval presence in the region. Additionally despite Chinese debt diplomacy Mauritius is the largest source of FDI into India thanks to the India-Mauritius Double Taxation Avoidance Treaty and the lax tax regime to avoid paying taxes (Asia Sentinel, 2018). However India's affinity with Mauritius can be improved furthermore if India can efficiently use its soft power assets such as its diasporic population. Considering the majority of Mauritius population are of Indian descent, India enjoys greater political and popular support in the region. China on the other hand is known for its aggressive posture and has little credibility and support in the global market. Because of this India in recent times is carefully utilizing its soft power asset in Mauritius to develop strategic and

comprehensive partnership. Most importantly, the majority of political leaders and decision makers in Mauritius are *girmitya*, descendants of Indian indentured laborers who came to work on sugarcane plantations under British rule (Asia Sentinel, 2018). Despite India's historical linkages with Mauritius, Chinese tourism and economic cooperation in the African states have grown in scale and significance. Today in Mauritius China has invested significantly in infrastructure development like China recently funded the construction of a new terminal at Mauritius' international airport (Asia Sentinel, 2018). Various new projects such as Eden Garden located in western Mauritius are constructed by the Chinese. Even Mauritian policy makers and leadership are projecting such projects as the new era of economic revival (Asia Sentinel, 2018). Today the Chinese reach in Mauritius is visible in the economic and trade zone which occupies 211 hectares of land located 3.5 kilo meters west of the Mauritian capital of Port Louis (Asia Sentinel, 2018). So in short India may have dominated the cultural and political sphere in Mauritius but in

terms of China's state-led approach to foreign investment is challenging Indian influence in the greater Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore the recent US\$700 million investment in a special economic zone has highlighted both Chinese supremacy and assertiveness in Africa (Asia Sentinel, 2018). In short India for a long time has failed to implement its cultural and political assets to develop economic and strategic ties with the African powers. Except for some periodic engagements India's also trails from China in regional diplomatic clout. Today China has already ventured into more than 43 missions in the African continent while India had only 29 missions (Asia Sentinel, 2018). Keeping in mind the Modi government has pushed for an active and serious Indian engagement in the African region. India has announced 18 more diplomatic missions which are expected to be opened over a four-year period to 2021 (Asia Sentinel, 2018).

Moreover Indian leadership has identified several areas in which both are going to work together in future. Areas such as Skills Development particularly in the Medical Sector, Tourism and Education hold great

potential for India. Further to overcome Chinese debt diplomacy, Mauritius is also looking for economic alternatives while actively promoting its domestic emerging sectors. In this aspect Indian investment along with joint India-Mauritius comprehensive economic partnership into the region will reinforce the existing bond India shares with Mauritius.

CONCLUSION

Even though Mauritius is a small and technologically underdeveloped Island nation, its geography helps Mauritius to occupy a central position in India's Indo-Pacific policy. Ancestral Diaspora connections and cultural affinities with India helped Mauritius to attract greater developmental, financial, technical, and educational assistance from India. However, the looming Chinese hegemony and pandemic pose challenges in Indo- Mauritius relations. As India is suffering from an economic downturn due to Covid-19 future investment and developments in Mauritius remain highly unlikely. On the other hand, Mauritius due to its geographical positioning at the

crossroads of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East has already attracted China. China's recent trade agreements are intended to increase trade with Mauritius but also secure its maritime assertive interests. However, India has some added advantages that China lacks. India's special partnership with Mauritius is not based on India's short-term geostrategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. With Mauritius, India shares a common heritage of kinship, culture, and language. The cultural dynamism between the two shaped their relations in the past and expects to influence future policy directions as well. Even though the India-Mauritius relationship is not at par, India under its Act East Policy understands the role of small and middle powers to protect India's maritime interests. However, India's partnership with Mauritius is destined to soar even higher in the coming years will be decided by proactive leadership, multilateral engagements, and how India can use its cultural assets to secure its maritime interests.

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