

# ISAS Insights

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## Mauritius-India Relationship: A Fine Balancing Act

*Mauritius has a deep and special relationship with India, resting upon historical migrations, religious affinity and close defence relations. At more than 60 per cent of the population, Indo-Mauritians are the politically dominant ethnic group. On 28 July 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping stopped in Mauritius, the second visit by a Chinese president to the Indian Ocean island nation in less than 10 years. India has been, and continues to be, the country's de facto security guarantor. However, preserving its influence will require a fine balancing act.*

Jivanta Schoettli<sup>1</sup>

### Deep Connectivity: 'Little India' in the Indian Ocean

Indo-Mauritian relations have often been described in superlatives by leaders on both sides. It is a special relationship that is 'unique', 'exceptional' and even 'sacred'.<sup>2</sup> In March 2018, India's President, Ram Nath Kovind, was the Chief Guest at the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mauritian independence and, in addressing the Indian diaspora, he reminded

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<sup>2</sup> See the statement by former Prime Minister Paul Berenger reported in Amit Baruah, "India-Mauritius Ties 'Umbilical and Sacred'", *The Hindu*, 22 November 2003. <https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/2003/11/23/stories/2003112303851000.htm>. Accessed on 10 August 2018.

them: “We are two countries, but one people. We have common civilisational roots. We share with you much more than any other country or society.”<sup>3</sup> Emblematic of the ‘umbilical relations’ that bind the two countries is *Aapravasi Ghat* where, between 1849 and 1923, an estimated half a million Indian indentured or contracted labourers were received and dispersed across the British Empire. Today, it is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage site to mark the place where the Empire’s ‘Great Experiment’ was launched and implemented – a scheme to replace the old system of slavery with a new regime of indentured or what was believed to be ‘free’ labour. One of the most important sources was India and it is estimated that 453,063 Indian labourers went between 1834 and 1912 to work on the labour-intensive sugar plantations of Mauritius.<sup>4</sup> This laid the base for what was to become the dominant ethnic group, known as Indo-Mauritians. Like others before him, Kovind, in his 2018 address, invoked this potent past when he stated, “We are linked by blood and sweat”.<sup>5</sup>

According to the last available census, approximately two-thirds of the Mauritian population are of Indian descent, with over 48 per cent identifying themselves as Hindu.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Mauritius is the only country in Africa with a majority Hindu population. The migrants were largely North Indian in origin and, thus, Hindi was the main Indian language that travelled with them, eventually becoming the medium through which religious, cultural and political linkages were fostered over the years with mainland India. On his visit, Kovind inaugurated the World Hindi Secretariat building in Mauritius – the fruition of a project, long in the making. Back in 1975, the first Prime Minister of Mauritius, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, chief-guest at the first World Hindi Conference, proposed the idea of setting up a secretariat to coordinate international Hindi-related activities. In August 2018, Mauritius will be hosting, for the second time, the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the World Hindi Conference.<sup>7</sup> Another example of

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<sup>3</sup> “Address by the President at Reception hosted for Indian Diaspora in Mauritius by the High Commissioner of India in Mauritius, (March 13, 2018)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 14 March 2018. [mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29611/address+by+the+president+at+reception+hosted+for+indian+diaspora+in+mauritius+by+the+high+commissioner+of+india+in+mauritius+march+13+2018](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29611/address+by+the+president+at+reception+hosted+for+indian+diaspora+in+mauritius+by+the+high+commissioner+of+india+in+mauritius+march+13+2018). Accessed on 7 August 2018.

<sup>4</sup> For a more historical analysis, see the 2010 article by Amit Kumar Mishra, “Indian Indentured Labourers in Mauritius: Reassessing the ‘New System of Slavery’ vs Free Labour Debate” in *Studies in History*, Vol 25, Issue 2, pp. 229-251.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Mauritius, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development Statistics, “Mauritius 2011 Housing And Population Census, Volume II: Demographic and Fertility Characteristics”, Statistics Mauritius.

<sup>7</sup> World Hindi Conference, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://www.vishwahindisammelan.gov.in/11th-world-hindi-conference.htm>. Accessed on 6 August 2018.

how powerful the Indo-Mauritian community has been and how deeply embedded and emotive the ties are with India, is the fact that, in 1972, a major crater lake located in the heart of Mauritius was consecrated as *Ganga Talao* (the Ganges Lake). It has become the country's most important Hindu pilgrimage site.

The special relationship with Mauritius extends well beyond the spiritual and cultural realms to that of politics and security. Since independence in 1968, all Mauritian prime ministers, save one, and all Mauritian presidents, except one, have been of Indian origin. Close political relations were institutionalised, especially in the 1980s, and steps taken to ensure and consolidate India's influence over the country.<sup>8</sup> Since 1983, it has been the practice to recruit the country's national security advisor from India's security forces and a commander for the National Coast Guard from the Indian navy.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, India has been regularly training the Mauritius National Police Force and conducting joint patrols of the country's vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

### **(Dis)Agreements over the Agalega Islands**

The Agalega Islands are located about 1,000 kilometres north of Mauritius, comprising a northern and southern island. Both are Mauritian dependencies, with a total land area of about 70 square kilometres and a population of a few hundred people. The islands form part of the Mascarene plateau, a geological formation that extends from Seychelles in the north to Reunion in the south. Control over the islands in this part of the Indian Ocean has been a part and parcel of geo-strategic competition since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Dutch, the British and the French vied for influence. In more recent times, the United States (US) has been the most powerful resident extra-regional power, thanks to its naval base on the atoll of Diego Garcia, described by some analysts as "the most important pieces of real estate in the Department of

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<sup>8</sup> For details about the extent to which India, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, was willing to go, see David Brewster and Ranjit Rai, 'Operation Lal Dora: India's aborted military intervention in Mauritius', *Asian Security*.

<sup>9</sup> For India's close involvement in the creation of and subsequent development of the Mauritian National Coast Guard and other security apparatus, see Sanjay Badri-Maharaj, "The Mauritius-India Naval Relationship: Naval Diplomacy 2.0", April-June 2018, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, India. <https://idsa.in/africatrends/the-mauritius-india-naval-relationship%3A-naval-diplomacy>. Accessed on 5 August 2018.

Defence's strategic arsenal".<sup>10</sup> Sensitivities in Mauritius abound over how the Chagos archipelago was excised from Mauritian territory by Great Britain in 1965 to form part of the British Indian Ocean Territory and later handed over in a 1971 deal, on lease, to the US for military purposes.

A major controversy over the Agalega Islands erupted in 2006 when reports appeared in Indian and Mauritian papers about plans to cede the twin islands to India.<sup>11</sup> Then-Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam had to categorically issue a denial in the Mauritian parliament, stating that the "Government of India was willing to develop an economic development plan for the islands". However, leaked Wikileaks cables from that time document a number of reasons why the US also believed then that India was pursuing a geo-strategically-motivated "hidden agenda" vis-à-vis the islands.<sup>12</sup>

In March 2015, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's landmark tour of three Indian Ocean island states, including Mauritius, a memorandum of understanding was signed to develop the island. Once again, the issue escalated into a political storm over whether or not a lease agreement had been signed; whether or not a dual-purpose coastal surveillance radar station was being considered. Clarifications had to be issued in the Mauritian parliament that a financial grant would be provided by the Indian government primarily with the aim of improving life on the island for local inhabitants and developing the island's economic potential. This included upgrading the existing jetty, dating from 1985, rehabilitation and repaving of a runway so bigger aircraft could land; installation of a power generation facility, a water desalination plant and construction of a national coast guard post. On 27 May 2017, during Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth's state visit to India, an agreement was signed titled "Maritime Security within the Framework of Project Agalega". Details about the agreement are not available and on Kovind's visit in March 2018, despite announcing yet another new line of credit of US\$100 million (S\$136.3 million) for defence procurement, a multi-purpose offshore patrol vessel and an additional grant component of

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<sup>10</sup> "How Diego Garcia Can Play a Pivotal Role in America's Relationship with India", Mark E Rosen, *National Interest*, 1 July 2018. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-diego-garcia-can-play-pivotal-role-americas-relationship-india-24777>. Accessed on 5 August 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, "Mauritius offers India 2 islands in effort to preserve tax treaty", Sidharta, *Times of India*, 6 July 2012. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Mauritius-offers-India-2-islands-in-effort-to-preserve-tax-treaty/articleshow/14697220.cms>. Accessed on 6 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Public Library of US Diplomacy, Wikileaks. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PORTLOUIS752\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06PORTLOUIS752_a.html). Accessed on 6 August 2018.

US\$5 million (S\$6.8 million), no mention was made of the Agalega project. In a media briefing, prior to the Indian president's departure, India's joint secretary of the Indian Ocean Region division, in responding to a question on the status of the project, said it had moved forward to "the implementation phase".<sup>13</sup>

## **Navigating Geopolitics: Delivering Security and Growth**

Mauritius is currently seeking to re-brand itself from an offshore centre to a mature, globally integrated international financial centre. In this endeavour, the growing presence and influence of China in the neighbourhood takes on particular significance. In June 2018, a Chinese-build mega dam was launched, 22 kilometres southeast of the Mauritian capital of Port Louis, at an elevation of 350 to 400 metres. The Bagatelle project was built by the China International Water & Electric Corporation, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the China Three Gorges Corporation, and the first state-owned enterprise of the Chinese hydropower industry to take part in an international economic cooperation initiative. Although Mauritius has not formally signed onto a project under the Belt and Road Initiative, the dam project is likely the beginning of more infrastructure investments aimed at turning Mauritius into a hub for Chinese financial activities and business with the African continent.<sup>14</sup>

In 2017 a series of high-level diplomatic visits reflected the growing momentum in Sino-Mauritian relations. Chinese President Xi Jinping's stopover in Mauritius on 29 July 2018 for a "friendly visit" on his way back from the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Summit in South Africa was further confirmation of the two countries' interest in deepening bilateral cooperation.

How India navigates the growing role of China in Mauritius will be a test of the principles and premises articulated by Modi in his landmark 11 March 2015 speech in Port Louis. Detailing India's vision of *Security and Growth for All in the Region* (SAGAR), he called for

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<sup>13</sup> "Transcript of Media Briefing on visit of President to Mauritius and Madagascar (March 09, 2018)", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 March 2018. <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/29594/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+on+visit+of+President+to+Mauritius+and+Madagascar+March+09+2018>. Accessed on 5 August 2018.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of Mauritius's aspirations, see "Vision 2030", published in 2017. [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sites/default/files/mauritius\\_jan-feb\\_2017\\_reprint\\_compr.pdf](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sites/default/files/mauritius_jan-feb_2017_reprint_compr.pdf). Accessed on 5 August 2018.

partnerships and greater cooperation in the region.<sup>15</sup> Whether this extends to collaboration with China in the Indian Ocean is an interesting question. The western reaches of the Indian Ocean have held particular importance for Indian strategic thinking, given the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf and the sense of the wider region being a natural sphere of influence based on historical and cultural ties. Hence, Modi, in his speech, harked back to a once unified geography, alluding to, what has been described by scholars as a sense of sacred unity, linking the subcontinent with the eastern and western reaches of the Indian Ocean, into “a single, inter-connected geopolitical and geo-economic unit with a common history...and a shared cultural space”.<sup>16</sup> Deep connectivity has certainly served both India and Mauritius well in practical terms. It has provided India with a strategic foothold in the western Indian Ocean, an opportunity to extend, develop and test its maritime capacities, most notably in the science of hydrography. For Mauritius, the relationship has been beneficial in terms of providing a security umbrella, bolstering the Hindu-Indian-origin political establishment and providing the country with an important source of earnings through the recently amended India-Mauritius 1982 tax treaty.

However, the trouble over the Agalega Islands highlights the difficulties India will continue to face, as its own maritime ambitions and capabilities expand, and China’s power in the region grows. Both India and China are countries in the Global South, they are advocates of South-South cooperation and draw upon the lessons of their own development experience. As a regional player, India’s room to manoeuvre has perhaps been more constrained precisely because of its shared experience of colonialism with countries in Africa and Asia. Icons of the freedom struggle, Afro-Asian solidarity and the espousal of values during the non-aligned years have tended to eclipse the necessary quid pro quos that underpin any relationship.

At a time when the idea of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ indicates a growing strategic convergence between the US and India, the task of balancing the delivery of security and growth will grow all the more pressing and delicate. On the issue of Chagos, for instance, India has to tread a fine line between, on the one hand not abandoning its former position of sympathy for the Chagossian and Mauritian cause and, on the other hand, not to antagonise the US by sticking

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<sup>15</sup> See “Prime Minister's Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius (March 12, 2015)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 12 March 2015. <http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/24912/prime+ministers+remarks+at+the+commissioning+of+offshore+patrol+vessel+opv+barracuda+in+mauritius+march+12+2015>. Accessed on 6 August 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Shyam Saran (2018), *How India Sees the World. Kautilya to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Juggernaut Books, New Delhi), p 16.

with a principled position. Perhaps it is these pressures which is prompting the current Indian government to ratchet up the use of security vocabulary when describing the relationship. Hence, in May 2017, when Jugnauth paid a state visit to India (his first overseas visit after being elected), at a jointly attended press statement, Modi described the two countries, “as frontline states of the Indian Ocean”.<sup>17</sup> Although it is unclear what this refers to, it strongly conveys a message of common security interests. Going on to emphasise that both leaders agree that “it is our responsibility to ensure collective maritime security around our coasts and in our EEZs”,<sup>18</sup> India and Mauritius may well be preparing the ground for greater Indian presence in the islands. [‘

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<sup>17</sup> “Press Statement by Prime Minister during the State visit of Prime Minister of Mauritius to India (May 27, 2017)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 27 May 2017. [http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28495/Press\\_Statement\\_by\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_during\\_the\\_State\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_of\\_Mauritius\\_to\\_India\\_May\\_27\\_2017](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28495/Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_the_State_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Mauritius_to_India_May_27_2017). Accessed on 5 August 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.