

# NEW MOMENTUM IN INDIA-MAURITIUS TIES

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***External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Mauritius on March 22-23, 2021 strengthens India's partnership with the key Indian Ocean island country across the economic, health and security spheres.***

In recent years, India has stepped up its engagement with Africa. Mauritius is an important partner among the Indian Ocean littoral countries in the region. During his visit to the country in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had flagged Mauritius's role as "a key leader for a secure and sustainable future for the Indian Ocean."<sup>1</sup>

India and Mauritius are connected by shared history. Almost 68 percent of the population of the country, including Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth, is of Indian origin. External Affairs Minister (EAM), S. Jaishankar's visit to the island country on March 22-23, 2021 has further strengthened the partnership across the economic, health and security spheres.

A watershed free trade pact, the 'Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement' (CECPA), was signed during the EAM's visit. This is the first of its kind agreement that India has signed with any country in Africa. The treaty was under negotiation since 2005. The CECPA will have a tremendous economic impact, as it will cut or eliminate duties on majority of goods as well as liberalise norms to promote services trade.<sup>2</sup>

The CECPA also marks a new step in the partnership between India and the African continent. The joint economic initiative will enable India Inc. to use Mauritius as a springboard for the expansion of their businesses into continental Africa. It will, therefore, help Mauritius emerge, in Jaishankar's words, as a "hub of Africa".<sup>3</sup>

The African countries are building a single market through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which also came into effect in January this year. AfCFTA encompasses 1.2 billion people with a combined market worth of \$3 trillion and will increase intra-Africa trade by over 50 percent and add \$76 billion income for the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Jaishankar's visit highlighted growing cooperation between the two countries in the field of health, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The EAM handed over a consignment of 100,000 doses of Made-in-India COVID-19 vaccines to Mauritius. This was in addition to 100,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines that India had gifted to Mauritius in January this year.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the vaccines, India supplied 23 tonnes of essential medicines, half a million tablets of hydroxychloroquine, as well as a consignment of Ayurvedic medicines. A 14-member Medical Assistance Team, under the Indian Navy's 'Mission SAGAR' initiative, also visited the country.

India-Mauritius health cooperation is not new. India has assisted in the development of the Jawaharlal Nehru Hospital and the Subramania Bharati Eye Centre in the country.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, Prime Minister Modi along with Prime Minister Pravind Jagunath virtually inaugurated a state of the art ENT hospital, built with the assistance of \$14 million.<sup>7</sup>

During Jaishankar's visit, India and Mauritius signed two agreements in the security realm. The

first agreement relates to the transfer of a Dornier aircraft and an Advanced Light Helicopter, Dhruv, on lease to Mauritius. These platforms will go a long way in helping the country monitor its extensive maritime zone. The second agreement relates to a \$100 million Line of Credit (LoC), to enable the procurement of defence equipment by Mauritius.

These agreements underline India's close cooperation with Mauritius in the defence and security field. Over the years, with India's support, Mauritius has been able to augment the skills of its security forces, and restructure and enhance the capacity of its National Coast Guard. More importantly, as per an agreement signed in 1974, Indian Naval and Coast Guard officers are seconded to the Mauritian National Coast Guard.[8](#)

India has extended support to Mauritius in enhancing its coastal surveillance capabilities by setting up the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS), in 2011.[9](#) India's defence cooperation with Mauritius benefits both countries. The CSRS network, for instance, enhances the country's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the Indian Ocean region. Mauritius, in turn, adds to its capabilities by engaging with professionals from the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard and by procuring Indian defence equipment at attractive financial terms.[10](#)

The EAM's visit reinforces the strategic importance of Mauritius with reference to India's policy towards the Indian Ocean/Indo-Pacific region. Rajnath Singh, India's Defence Minister, while inaugurating the first IOR Defence Ministers Conclave on February 4, 2021, pointed out that "two-thirds of the world's oil shipments, one-third of its bulk cargo, and half of its container traffic", transit through the Indian Ocean.[11](#)

During his first visit to Mauritius in 2015, Prime Minister Modi called for Mauritius-India cooperation to make Indian Ocean safe, secure and free from any challenge. It was also in Mauritius that Modi articulated his vision for the region — SAGAR (Security and Growth for All).[12](#) This vision called for deepening economic and security cooperation with India's maritime neighbours.

India's engagement with African countries, particularly with the Indian Ocean Region littoral states, has since increased. India has launched several initiatives, including the third India-Africa Forum Summit in 2015, the first India-Africa Defence Ministers Conclave in 2020 and India-IOR Defence Ministers Conclave in February 2021. This conclave had representation from Mauritius. India has also interacted with the countries in the region through multilateral mechanisms such as Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

In recent years, several external powers, including China, have made increasing inroads in Africa and its Indian Ocean littorals. Mauritius has not been immune from this trend. In January 2021, China's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Mauritius came into effect.[13](#) This agreement will help China expand the Belt and Road strategy in Africa.[14](#) While the jury is still out on whether this FTA will benefit Mauritius, China's increasing presence in the region will pose difficult questions for countries like India.

While India and Mauritius share cultural contiguity dating back to the colonial times and a special partnership in recent years, India cannot take its influence in Mauritius for granted and should continue to enhance its engagement with this important island country.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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