

Mauritius's Indian Ocean centrality and power of India-led partnerships

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Small island States, often dismissed as peripheral specks on the world map, have emerged as pivotal players in contemporary geopolitics. Their strategic locations, vast exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and control over critical maritime passages amplify their influence far beyond their size or population. In an era of great-power competition, climate vulnerability, and supply-chain fragility, these nations function as linchpins for maritime security, resource governance, and regional stability. Mauritius exemplifies this reality in the Indian Ocean, where its centrality underscores how geography can confer leverage even to a nation of just 1.3 million people overseeing an EEZ exceeding 1.3 million square kilometres.



External affairs minister S. Jaishankar and Mauritius Prime Minister Navinchandra Ramgoolam discussed ways to bolster cooperation across a range of areas. (@DrSJaishankar)

Mauritius sits at the crossroads of the western Indian Ocean, bridging Africa, Asia, and key sea lanes. Its position enhances its role as a gateway for trade, investment, and security cooperation. Yet this centrality also exposes it to global shocks. Recent conflicts in West Asia, including disruptions linked to the Strait of Hormuz closure in early 2026, have triggered an acute energy crisis for the island. Mauritius relies heavily on imported fossil fuels; accounting for roughly 80% of its power mix, with heavy fuel oil (HFO) vital for electricity generation. Geopolitical tensions have disrupted supplies, forcing emergency imports of 65,500 metric tonnes of HFO from Singapore at a cost of ₹2.4 billion and raising fears of blackouts. The

government has warned of potential rotating power cuts and sought temporary floating power plants, while accelerating a 405 MW renewable energy pipeline, including solar, wind, battery storage, and home solar kits, to bolster resilience by 2028.

This crisis highlights broader vulnerabilities. A potential "choking" of the Strait of Malacca; through conflict, piracy escalation, or great-power tensions, would compound the pain. The Malacca Strait carries about 25% of global maritime trade, including vast volumes of oil and goods linking the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. Nearly 80% of China's oil imports transit this chokepoint, but disruptions would ripple outward, inflating shipping costs, delaying energy deliveries, and affecting rerouting via longer paths like the Cape of Good Hope or Indonesian straits. For Mauritius, already grappling with HFO shortages tied to West Asian instability, a Malacca crisis could spike global oil prices further, strain foreign exchange reserves, and disrupt its role as a trade and financial hub. Small island States like Mauritius lack the buffers of larger economies; their open, import-dependent systems make them early victims of distant chokepoint volatility.

Compounding these risks is Mauritius's deepening economic ties with China, which have created notable imbalances. China is a major source of imports, with bilateral trade heavily skewed: Mauritius imported nearly \$993 million from China in 2023 while exporting only about \$26 million. The 2021 China-Mauritius Free Trade Agreement, the first such FTA between China and an African country, aimed to boost access but has not corrected the deficit. Chinese investments flow into infrastructure, finance, and positioning Mauritius as a gateway to Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative. While beneficial for development, funding projects like airports, dams, and special economic zones, the asymmetry raises concerns over dependency, debt sustainability, and strategic autonomy. Mauritius serves as a financial platform for Chinese outward investment into the continent, yet this tilts the balance of influence toward Beijing at a time when diversified partnerships are essential for resilience.

Mauritius hosts the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Secretariat, underscoring its convening power. Its EEZ and proximity to chokepoint positions it as a node for maritime surveillance, blue economy initiatives, and disaster risk management. In an ocean where 90% of India's trade and significant hydrocarbon imports transit, Mauritius's stability directly affects major players. Its cultural and historical links, significant percentage of the population is of Indian origin, add soft-power depth, while disputes like Chagos highlight sovereignty assertions amid external bases and alliances.

To navigate these pressures, Mauritius must leverage partnerships with India and like-minded countries through groupings such as IORA, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), and the Colombo Security Conclave. India has long been a trusted partner, with deep historical ties and a shared vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Recent developments illustrate the potential: during high-level visits in 2025-2026, India and Mauritius advanced an oil and gas supply agreement to enhance energy security amid West Asia crises. India is also deploying a defence attaché to Mauritius, expanding joint maritime surveillance,

and supporting renewable projects, including 100,000 home solar kits. Infrastructure like the Agaléga facility bolsters coast guard capabilities and regional monitoring. These steps align with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and its evolved MAHASAGAR vision, positioning Mauritius as a key node for mutual security and development.

Within IORA, comprising 23-member States and dialogue partners including Australia, the EU, Japan, the UK, and the US; Mauritius can champion practical cooperation. IORA's priorities, like maritime safety and security, trade facilitation, blue economy, disaster risk management, and renewable energy, provide platforms for joint capacity-building, information sharing, and diversified supply chains. Mauritius could push for enhanced energy resilience initiatives, such as regional renewable grids, fuel stockpiling mechanisms, or alternative shipping protocols to mitigate chokepoint risks. Collaborations on sustainable fisheries, marine pollution, and climate adaptation would address SIDS vulnerabilities while fostering rules-based governance under UNCLOS. Dialogue partners like Japan and the US bring technology and financing for green transitions, reducing over-reliance on any single partner.

Broader groupings amplify this leverage. The IOC, with its focus on western Indian Ocean islands, enables targeted maritime and economic projects. Engaging Quad-like alignments or minilaterals involving India, France, Australia, and others can diversify security architecture without confrontation. By investing in domestic capabilities, such as renewables target of 60% by 2030, energy efficiency, and transport electrification, it can reduce import dependence from 80% and build negotiating power.

The path forward requires strategic pragmatism. Mauritius will have to accelerate its 405 MW renewable pipeline, liberalise home solar programmes, and integrate battery storage to handle peak demand and intermittency. Diversifying fuel sources via agreements with India and others hedges against Hormuz or Malacca shocks. In trade, leveraging the India-Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement alongside IORA can boost exports and correct imbalances. Diplomatically, hosting IORA activities and advocating for small States' voices in global forums reinforces agency.

Ultimately, Mauritius demonstrates that small island States are not passive bystanders but active architects of regional order. Their vulnerabilities, energy fragility, trade imbalances, chokepoint exposure- mirror global risks, yet their centrality offers agency. By deepening partnerships with India and like-minded nations in IORA and beyond, Mauritius can forge stability through diversified resilience rather than dependency. This approach safeguards sovereignty, supports sustainable growth, and contributes to a rules-based Indian Ocean where prosperity flows equitably. In an interconnected world, the "small" often hold outsized keys to security; Mauritius is poised to turn its geography into enduring strength, provided it acts with foresight and balanced partnerships.

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