



CURRENT AFFAIRS



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SIGNIFICANCE OF AGALEGA ISLANDS FOR INDIA

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "SIGNIFICANCE OF AGALEGA ISLANDS FOR INDIA". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

WHY IN THE NEWS?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Mauritian counterpart Pravind Jugnauth will open a new airstrip and jetty, as well as six development projects on Mauritius' Agalega Island.

ABOUT AGALEGA ISLANDS

- Agalega Islands are a remote archipelago located in the Indian Ocean, situated approximately **1,100 kilometres north of Mauritius**, which is its nearest neighbour. Comprising North Island and South Island, Agalega is part of the Outer Islands of Mauritius.
- Prominent residential areas comprise **Vingt Cinq on the North Island and Sainte Rita on the South Island**, acting as central points for both inhabitants and economic pursuits.
- The isolated nature of Agalega makes it a distinctive and sparsely populated destination. The island group is surrounded by the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, contributing to its **secluded and tranquil environment**. The **absence of a native land mammal population** on Agalega enhances its unique ecological characteristics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF NEW INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS ON AGALEGA ISLAND:

• Geopolitical Importance:

1. **Strategic Presence:** The development projects aim to solidify India's presence in the southwestern Indian Ocean, aligning with its strategic aspirations in the region.
2. **Countering Strategic Competition:** These initiatives can be seen as a response to China's growing influence in the region, particularly its "String of Pearls" strategy.

• Economic Benefits:

Trade Security: Given the critical role Mauritius plays in Indian Ocean trade and the large volume of Indian trade transiting the region, maintaining a presence on Agalega enhances India's trade security.

• Regional Cooperation:

1. **SAGAR Initiative:** The project aligns with India's Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative, demonstrating commitment to regional development and security.

2. **Strengthening Ties:** The collaboration fosters and promotes stronger cooperation between India and its neighbouring countries.

- **Security Enhancement:**

1. **Mauritius' Security:** Upgrading infrastructure on Agalega Island will bolster the capabilities of Mauritian security forces and contribute to improved regional security.
2. **Countering China's Diplomatic Footprint:** China has established embassies in several Indian Ocean island nations, including Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, and Comoros. This network allows them to cultivate diplomatic ties and potentially expand their influence in the region.

Geopolitical Chessboard

An agreement to use French bases could ensure that Indian warships move across the Indo-Pacific relatively unimpeded



CHALLENGES SURROUNDING THE AGALEGA ISLAND DEVELOPMENT:

- **Domestic Concerns:**

1. **Transparency:** The Mauritian opposition has raised concerns about the project's transparency, specifically regarding potential conflicts of interest. Additionally, the lack of a required environmental impact assessment (EIA) has fueled criticism.

2. **Local Fears:** The historical displacement of Chagos Islanders by the UK has instilled fears among Agalega residents regarding their own potential displacement due to the project.
- **Regional Dynamics:**
 1. **Militarization Concerns:** The presence of military bases belonging to several major powers like France, China, the US, and the UK in the Indian Ocean has raised concerns regarding the potential militarization of the previously peaceful Agalega region.
 2. **Strategic Competition:** China's growing presence in the northern Indian Ocean, including the deployment of submarines and ships, poses a strategic challenge for India.
- **India's Approach:**
 1. **Security Focus:** Some argue that India's excessive focus on security in its foreign policy towards its neighbours hasn't yielded positive results in the past.
 2. **Shifting Focus:** The suggestion is that India should reconsider its approach to Mauritius, placing greater emphasis on addressing common regional challenges such as climate change, sustainable development, and the blue economy.

A LONGSTANDING BOND: INDIA-MAURITIUS RELATIONS

India and Mauritius share a deep-rooted historical connection dating back centuries. Here's a glimpse into their relationship:

- **Early Ties:** Trade links flourished between India and the island nation, then known as Isle de France, as early as the 17th century. Indian labourers were brought to Mauritius during the colonial period, contributing significantly to the island's development and forming a vital part of its population.
- **Post-Independence Partnership:** Following Mauritius' independence in 1968, India played a crucial role in supporting its economic and political development. This included providing financial assistance, educational opportunities, and technical expertise.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Links:** The strong cultural and linguistic ties between the two nations are evident in the large Indian diaspora in Mauritius, who have preserved their heritage while integrating seamlessly into Mauritian society. Hindi is widely spoken alongside French and English, further strengthening the cultural bond.
- **Strategic Cooperation:** The Indian Ocean region holds strategic importance for both countries. India has provided Mauritius with patrol boats and other defence equipment, contributing to maritime security cooperation.
- **Economic Ties:** The Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA), signed in 2021, marked a significant milestone, enhancing economic collaboration between the two countries. This agreement aims to boost trade, investment, and technological cooperation, fostering a more integrated and mutually beneficial economic relationship.

PRELIMS PRACTISE QUESTIONS

Q1. Which major powers have established military bases in the Indian Ocean region?

- (a) Russia and Japan
- (b) **France, China, US, and UK**
- (c) India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka
- (d) Australia, New Zealand, and Indonesia

Answer: B

Q2. What is the historical connection between India and the Agalega Islands?

- (a) Colonial rule
- (b) Economic trade
- (c) Indentured labour migration
- (d) Cultural exchange

Answer: C

MAINS PRACTISE QUESTION

Q1. Both India and Mauritius have an interest in maintaining a peaceful and secure Indian Ocean. However, the growing presence of major powers like China and the US creates a complex security dynamic. Evaluate the potential benefits and risks of India's development projects on the Agalega Islands for regional security and India-Mauritius relations.

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