Indian Base in Mauritius' Agalega Islands

Why in News

Recently, Mauritius has denied a report that it has allowed **India to build a military base on the remote island of Agalega.**

- Earlier it was reported by a news broadcaster that an **airstrip and two jetties to house an Indian military base on Agalega island is under construction.**

Key Points

- **Background:**

    - In 2015, India signed an agreement with Mauritius for development of Agalega Islands.

        - It provided for **setting up and upgradation of infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity enhancing capabilities** of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island.
    - However, since then, **there have been growing reports over the Indian naval and coastguard's interests in setting up transponder systems and surveillance infrastructure,** which has led to some local protests.
- **Agelega Project:**

    - Agelega project includes **the construction of a jetty, rebuilding, and extension of the runway, and building an airport terminal** on Agalega Island.

- The USD 87 million projects are funded by India.
    - The project would add a new airport, port and logistics and communication facilities and potentially any other facilities related to the project.
    - The Agelega island is located in the **southwestern Indian Ocean,** 1,122 km north of Mauritius.

        - It has a total land area of 27 square miles (70 square km).
- **Significance:**

    - **Strengthen India's Presence:**

        - It will strengthen India's presence in the south-west Indian Ocean and **facilitate its power launch aspirations in the region.**
        - India considers the new base **necessary to facilitate both air and surface maritime patrols** in the south-west Indian Ocean and as an intelligence post.
    - **Geo-Economic:**

        - As a **"central geographic point"** Mauritius holds importance for commerce and connectivity in the Indian Ocean.
        - As a member of the **African Union, Indian Ocean Rim Association** and the Indian Ocean Commission, Mauritius is a stepping stone to multiple geographies.
        - As a founding-member of the **'Small Island Developing States'** (SIDS) it has been seen as a significant neighbour.
    - **Protect Foreign Trade:**

        - **95% of India's trade by volume and** 68% of trade by value **comes via the Indian Ocean.**
        - Nearly **80% of India's crude oil requirement is imported by sea via the Indian Ocean.** So presence in the Indian Ocean is of significance for India.
    - **Countering China:**

        - To counter China's **'String of Pearls'** which can prove to be a threat to our strategic interests, it became extremely necessary for us to have a presence in the larger **Indian Ocean Region.**
    - **Security And Growth for All in Region:**

        - The project can be seen as a part of India's efforts to contribute to its neighbor's development stories under SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in Region)**.**
        - The project can be seen as a way to increase cooperation between India and its neighbors.
    - **Enhancing Security infrastructure of Mauritius:**

        - The project will **enhance the capabilities of Mauritius security forces** through upgradation in its infrastructure.
- **Challenges:**

    - **Protests from Opposition:**

        - Mauritius opposition has been raising **concerns regarding transparency in the project.**
        - The Mauritian government has **exempted the project from any Environmental license process (EIA clearances).**
    - **Protests from local People:**

        - In 1965, before Mauritian independence, the UK split the Chagos islands from Mauritius, forcibly relocating the inhabitants.. Many Agalégans fear they could suffer a similar fate.
        - All major military powers like **France, China, US, and the UK have naval bases**

in the Indian Ocean this is **leading to fears that their peaceful island region will also be militarised.**

- **China Centric Policies:**

  - China's rapidly **growing presence in the northern part of the Indian Ocean** along with the deployment of Chinese submarines and ships in the region is a challenge for India.

- **Obsessive Security Policy:**

  - An obsessively security-driven policy of India towards its neighbours has not helped in the past.
  - Certain **common challenges** like **climate change**, sustainable development and the **blue economy** should be **reconsidered in India's approach to Mauritius.**

- **Other Recent Developments:**

  - In July 2021, Prime Ministers of India and Mauritius jointly **inaugurated a Supreme Court building** in Maritius.
  - In February 2021, the Union Cabinet approved signing of the **Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA)** between India and Mauritius.
  - India and Mauritius signed a **USD 100 million Defence Line of Credit** agreement
  - Mauritius would get a Dornier aircraft and an **Advanced Light Helicopter Dhruv** on lease which would build its maritime security capabilities.
  - The two sides also discussed the **Chagos Archipelago** dispute, which was an issue of sovereignty and sustainable development before the **United Nations (UN)**.

    - In 2019, **India voted at the UN General Assembly in support of the Mauritian** position on the issue. India was one of the 116 countries that voted demanding that the UK end its "colonial administration" from the group of islands.
  - India **delivered 1,00,000 Covishield vaccines** to Mauritius.

Way Forward

- Unlike the military bases run by other countries, the **Indian bases are the soft base which means locals can move through any Indian-made project.** So the local governments get more control over their domain, without diluting their sovereignty.
- India needs to **project itself as a credible and long-term partner** in a more persuasive manner by allaying the fears of all parties affected.
- Companies registered in Mauritius are the largest source of **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)** into India, making it **crucial for India to upgrade its bilateral tax treaty, adopting the latest international practices** that prevent multinational companies from artificially shifting profits to low tax countries.
- As India takes an integrated view of its security cooperation in the south western Indian Ocean, **Mauritius is the natural node for it.** Therefore, it is important to take course-corrections in India's **Neighbourhood First policy.**

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