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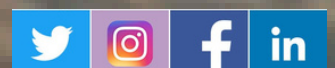
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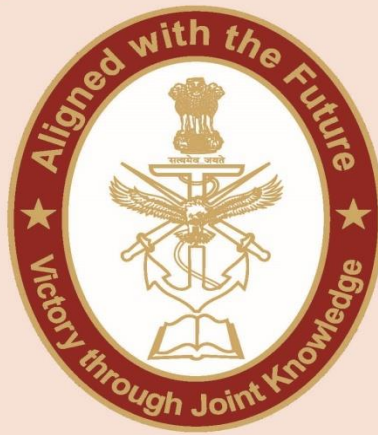
# UNDERSTANDING THE SEYCHELLOIS INTERESTS: AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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INDIA**



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### Abstract

*With a steep rise in diplomatic troubles with Maldives and the failure of the Assumption Island Project in Seychelles, it becomes imperative to understand the country and discuss India's defence outreach in Seychelles with a renewed lens. Seychelles' strategic geographical location and stable political culture puts it at a pedestal of advantage higher than that of its contemporary nation-states in the Indian Ocean Region and East Africa. The paper aims to study the defence and security interests of Seychelles and understanding the phenomenon of its foreign affairs performing better than any of its microstate and island contemporaries. It concludes with how it is a country of high significance for the maritime security outreach of India in the Indian Ocean.*

### Introduction: Finding Seychelles

Situated in the crucial maritime trade routes, northeast of Madagascar, around 1500 km east of mainland Africa, and with 115 islands providing it with one of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones<sup>1</sup> in the world, Seychelles, despite being the smallest country in terms of population and area in Africa<sup>2</sup>, finds itself in a geographically

advantageous position. Its proximity to the maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Mozambique Channel<sup>3</sup> makes it a viable location for maritime patrolling.

Post its independence from the United Kingdom in 1976<sup>4</sup>, the country experienced several coups until the introduction of a multi-party democratic system in 1993, which led to over two decades of stable political culture<sup>5</sup>. This stability led to multiple foreign direct investments, infrastructure projects, defence partnerships with suitors such as India, the US, and China. But like any other sparsely populated and small country, the popular opinion in Seychelles wishes to avoid over-reliance on any one country to safeguard its sovereignty.

### **The Assumption Island Project**

The current political party in power, Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS) with Wavel Ramkalawan at its apex won the presidency of the country with similar sentiments<sup>6</sup>. One of the exercises of this public sentiment that evolves into opinion was the Assumption Island Project, which seems to have been shelved<sup>7</sup> despite certain revisions in 2018 and India's constant notifications about it being a joint project with the Government of Seychelles. It must be underscored that despite its strong opinion on this project<sup>8</sup>, Ramkalawan's government is not anti-India in its approach; it knows how to preserve its interests without harming the goodwill of the other country, an art of diplomacy which seems to be lost in the world due to intolerance and lack of understanding in the global affairs.

Assumption is a remote island located around 1140 km southwest of the Mahe Islands. The deal originally signed in 2015 during the official visit of Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi to Victoria was renewed in 2018<sup>9</sup>. A popular rumour found its voice in the then opposition party of Seychelles, which is now ruling the country that the then President Danny Faure had leased the island to India for a naval base; which India explicitly clarified was not the case. Instead, its proximity to the Mozambique Channel could provide India with an opportunity to assist Seychelles in maritime surveillance. In order to see the light of the day, this deal must be ratified by the Parliament of Seychelles, something which is not possible if the winds of the popular public opinion are against it<sup>10</sup>.

### **Balancing the Foreign Affairs**

The Assumption Island Project, elaborated in the last paragraph was one of the instances of how Seychelles, despite having a population of less than a hundred thousand people and a diplomatic staff of around a hundred has a strong understanding of its foreign policy interests. Seychelles, as a microstate has gained enormous respect in the oceanic spaces. This steep rise in its worth was remarked as "surprising"<sup>11</sup> by one scholar of diplomacy. Being a new republic after having spent close to over a hundred years under the British colonialism, the country has adjusted to its realities and invented its independent philosophies instead of falling into the hands of any foreign interests.

Seychelles has come out to be one of the most prominent leaders on the debates pertaining to blue economy, which is the co-existence with the vast natural oceanic heritage inherited by the country while binding development, sustenance, resources, and society together. The products collected from the ocean and the coastal regions are used as inputs, and used for furthering the sustainable economy goals of the state. Complementing this, Seychelles has also come out as a pioneer in the ocean governance by its innovation in this field and has gained voice in the international oceanic forums despite its small diplomatic staff strength.

As scholars like to put, Seychelles is a classic victim of quadruple predicament<sup>12</sup>. Such scenarios often occur when microstates have to deal with more powerful powers, that have the tendency to use it as a military base or an extended territory, causing asymmetric relationships. India has had the advantage of being distantly located as to not cause the Big Brother Syndrome<sup>13</sup> that has swept her away from her immediate neighbours; and has been carefully treading the path while providing Seychelles with its necessities so that it does not have to be dependent on China. Seychelles is fully optimising its strategic location, in order to not fall into sacrificing its interests while paving the way for other powerful states. And as we can easily infer from the stalling of the Assumption Island Project, Seychelles knows well that the other countries that hold major interest in the country will respect its internal dynamics and political culture.

There was a significant depreciation in the interests of the Atlantic countries in Seychelles after the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). It was

renewed in the mid-2000s when the Horn of Africa, the Somali Sea, and the Mozambique Channel saw a steep rise in the acts of piracy<sup>14</sup>. Seychelles got donations from across the world and allowed prosecution of the pirates in its country<sup>15</sup>, which showed the world its willingness and courage to stand by its region. The United States in 2011, had established a secret drone base to assist Seychelles to combat the piracy movements around the coasts of Somalia and Yemen<sup>16</sup>. Around the same time, China, was invited to establish a military base in Seychelles to combat the pirates, but no outcome came out of it, given China's insistence on its principle of not having any military base abroad<sup>17</sup>. Interestingly, despite it, we saw, the installation of one Chinese military facility in Djibouti<sup>18</sup> in 2017.

China has been a "great friend" of Seychelles, as the President Ramkalawan likes to put<sup>19</sup>. The US Air Force Tracking Station used to monitor the Soviet satellites and it was a major highlight of the Seychellois lifestyle. Post the fall of the Soviet Union, the US abruptly left the station in 1996, and the vacuum got filled by China. China has gained the goodwill of the people in Seychelles. Despite its non-participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) established by China and providing no such military facility to China; and without asking for anything back, China has been building schools, hospitals, and other relevant infrastructure projects<sup>20</sup>. It must be underscored that this is not one of those instances of debt-trap diplomacy by China, because considering the very small population and low cost of the projects, China has been gifting them to Seychelles. China had donated several of its patrolling aircrafts and boats including one Type-62 patrol boat and two Y-12 aircrafts<sup>21</sup> to Seychelles and has infrastructure projects as the Social Housing Project going on. Which is in direct contrast with that of the US, that opened its embassy in Victoria in June, 2023<sup>22</sup>, after more than 25 years of its exit. The Chinese Government has also been awarding the Seychellois students scholarships to study in China and around two thousand students there have learnt Chinese at the Confucius Institute<sup>23</sup>. This policy of China towards Seychelles is in direct contrast with the image it holds in the other countries, where it has invested multi-million dollar that the other country must pay back with high rates of interest.

The US knows that it cannot alter the goodwill that China has earned in the eyes of Seychellois, thus made a classic statement that it only established its embassy to see through a peaceful democratic transfer of power in the country. Seychelles does not take any sides, it finds herself on the non-aligned spectrum of alliances — but its

democratic principles and stand on the Russia-Ukraine War gels up well with the US, while its stance on One China<sup>24</sup>, is appreciated by China. The foreign policy of Seychelles, where she knows the art of balancing the geopolitical alliances and get the most out of them must be a part of the textbooks.

### **India's Partnership with Seychelles**

India and Seychelles have had a traditional partnership dating back to the year 1770, when the country was being conditioned to the human presence for the first time after a small group of five Indian plantation workers had landed, along with seven African slaves, and fifteen French colonists. During the British Era, for some time, the islands used to be ruled under the Bombay Presidency. Formal diplomatic ties were established in 1976 when Seychelles attained its freedom from the United Kingdom<sup>25</sup>.

There had been multiple coup d'état attempts after its freedom until multi-party democracy was established in the mid-1990s. India helped thwart two of those attempts at the request of the Seychellois President by sending INS Vindhyagiri, in the first instance in 1986 to signal her support for the President France Albert Rene, who ironically, had entered into the position after a coup against his predecessor himself<sup>26</sup>. In 2010, Dr Manmohan Singh's government wrote off almost half of Seychellois debt to India<sup>27</sup>, to counterbalance the growing reach and effects of China in the country. When it comes to defence equipment, India had gifted two patrol boats, PS Topaz and PS Constant to Seychelles in 2005 and 2014, respectively. Apart from them India also gifted Indian Coast Guard's Fast Interceptor Boat C-405 in 2016, two Dornie Maritime Surveillance Aircrafts (in 2013 and 2018), and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in 2015 to enable a secure coast for the country<sup>28</sup>.

The biennial defence exercise with India is called "LAMITYE", which means friendship in Creole language has been a major highlight of the defence partnership that has been taking place since 2011. In 2024, there were forty-five personnel each from the Gorkha Rifles of the Indian Army and Seychelles Defence Forces. The exercise was done within semi-urban environments to enhance their proficiency in addressing contemporary security problems<sup>29</sup>.

India's infrastructure investment in Seychelles has often been overshadowed by her defence cooperation with the country. In 2021, India funded a new Magistrates' Court Building in the capital city of Victoria. This state-of-the-art building was India's first major civil infrastructure project in Seychelles. A One-MW solar power plant, that could meet the consumption of around 400 Seychellois households every year was completed in the same year. Ten community development projects were also completed in Seychelles. Apart from it, India had donated 50,000 doses of the COVID-19 Vaccine, which helped the country of a hundred thousand develop a strong herd immunity<sup>30</sup>.

In 2015, a year after the new government of India came to power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his visits to the Indian Ocean islands initiated the vision for Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)<sup>31</sup>. SAGAR aims to enhance the maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region and is the reflection of India's maritime vision. Interestingly, Seychelles was the first country that was visited by the prime minister in that tour.

### **Complexities in the Indo-Seychelles Relationship and Recommendations**

**The String of Pearls and Counter-Balancing China:** Several experts believe that the SAGAR vision is a response to the String of Pearls<sup>32</sup> strategy employed by China, which is building a network of civil, military bases and friendly ports that can provide the Chinese to protect their trade interests that pass through the choke points like the Gulf of Aden and Mozambique Channel amongst others. India, despite being a peninsular country and opening up in the Indian Ocean will be at a disadvantage due to the vast naval forces of China that would have surrounded India through this strategy. Apart from the endangering the Indian maritime security, the Chinese strategy will pull the need for Indian goodwill in the India Ocean Region away. India's existing diplomatic relations will be affected negatively because of the reach of the Chinese resources to those countries.

Additionally, if the Indian initiatives give the slightest of the hints that the policies are reactionary; something, not independent of China, or would not exist, had it not been for the Chinese strategy, India will be viewed in the same light as the United States. India must never explicitly hint that her outreach is meant to contain the ambitions of China, else the measures to curb the excess would come off as selfish; and India is

already aware what the Big Brother Syndrome has done to her neighbours — becoming suspicious of every outreach of India.

**Climate Change:** Seychelles was swift in adopting the blue economy<sup>33</sup> structure to enhance its trade and needs, but a non-traditional security issue like climate change received the global attention around the same time when it gained independence, but being an archipelago, it can either delay the imminent threat or reduce its effects. There have been heat risks due to its proximity to the equator, excess rainfall, landslides, flooding, and most importantly, rise in the mean sea level. Seychelles has been proactive on the international oceanic and environmental forums about the detrimental effects of climate change. India has a minimal role to play, given she is fighting the unpredictability of the climate change herself, but at times of disaster, India has always been the first responder. Although Seychelles has been able to find its voice on the global forums, India should actively collaborate with it and discuss the issues concerning climate change in the other mainland-based alliances as well.

**Popular Sentiment in the Seychelles:** Although the 11 per cent population of Seychelles is of the Indian Origin and even the current Prime Minister, Wavel Ramkalawan owes his ancestry to India<sup>34</sup> — the public understands how important it is to uphold the sovereignty of the state and not succumb to any external pressure. This could be seen through the stalling of the Assumption Island Project, because it would have harmed her principle of non-alignment. India, of course, understands the complex nature of domestic politics in a democratic nation-state and perhaps, is waiting for the right moment to begin the talks for the project again.

**Regional Instability in East Africa:** Somalia has had a long history of terrorism and violent revolts, and the coastal areas find themselves engulfed in piracy. Ethiopia and South Sudan have had a recurring theme of ethnic violence.<sup>35</sup> There has been a steep rise in the non-state armed actors in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda that target the civilians and disrupt the working apparatus of their respective governments. Along with political violence and human trafficking — this region is one of the world's most highly unstable regions<sup>36</sup>. Although the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces are stationed, their power in containing the conflicts is limited. In this case, there are high chances that such a regional instability can spill over into the waters of



Seychelles, which would disrupt India's vision for the Indian Ocean Region. This is an unpredictable factor that is influenced by uncontrollable actors.

**Lack of Skilled Personnel:** Reports suggest that Seychelles lacks skilled information technology personnel<sup>37</sup>. In this case, India's effort towards sharing strategic tech and providing military equipment might not result in a linear output curve. To counter this issue, capacity building could be taken up in Seychelles. Like China, India should encourage students to apply for institutions based out of India; build institutions meant to develop these basic skills in Seychelles itself.

**Reducing Dependency:** Complementing the previous point about capacity building, India should work on reducing the dependency of Seychelles towards other powerful countries by encouraging self-dependency in skilled personnel in the country. A message of India promoting self-dependency would travel miles and benefit both the countries in the long run.

### **Conclusion**

Seychelles as a country is strategically located. Its significance was ignored by the United States until very recently when it realised how crucial it is to safeguard a democratic country from falling into the lap of China. Seychelles' foreign policy and blue economy remain the focus elements of any theoretical study of how a small island state can maximise its influence in an asymmetrical relationship with a more powerful country. India has had traditional ties with Seychelles. Although the recent initiatives aimed at the Indian Ocean Region might have been brought up to counter-balance China, even if China had not existed in the power struggle, India would have had this close partnership with Seychelles. The Chinese President had appropriately called Seychelles a "shining pearl"<sup>38</sup> in 2007, and with the country heading towards its national elections in 2025, it will be interesting to see how the country will be preserving its autonomy amidst this quest for the shining pearl.

### **DISCLAIMER**

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