

# Seychelles: A Small Island State in a Troubled Sea

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Stand on the shore of any of the 115 islands of Seychelles and one is presented with a vision of the sea that is nothing short of idyllic, an enticing palette of blue and turquoise, streaked at dawn and dusk with delicate shades of gold and peach. This is the imagery that sustains the country's tourist industry – the main pillar of the economy – a tropical paradise that lures visitors from around the world. Tranquility is the watchword. Beyond the horizon, however, there is another reality. Far from being a zone of enduring peace, as has sometimes been conjectured, the world's third largest ocean is marked by a series of flashpoints, any one of which, if ignited, could have far-reaching repercussions. The Indian Ocean is by no means solely the seductive idyll that is portrayed; it is also a troubled sea, a place of conflicting perspectives.

Seychelles is a small nation, an archipelago scattered across a wide stretch of the western Indian Ocean. Although historically remote (it was not permanently settled until the second half of the eighteenth century), it is no longer detached from global issues, some of which pose a direct threat to its own integrity. With a population of fewer than 100,000, it has to navigate carefully in the interests of its long-term security.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight those geopolitical issues which are creating turbulence in the region, and to ask if a small state can find ways to minimize their impact. There have been attempts in the past to designate the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace and, with some personal reluctance, the first section of the paper dismisses these as unrealistic. This is followed by a review of the main geopolitical issues that originate within the region, and then, to add to these, the various threats from outside. Finally, thought is given to whether a small island state like Seychelles can really do much to secure its own interests; is its destiny totally controlled by more powerful forces or are there ways to chart its own course?

## Whither a zone of peace?

Generally, on a map of world peace, the Indian Ocean has fared well. During the two world wars of the twentieth century, it saw less military action than either the Atlantic or the Pacific. Indeed, following the Second World War and the spread of nuclear weapons, there

were hopes in some quarters that the Indian Ocean could enjoy protected status as a zone of peace.

At the height of the Cold War, amidst growing concern that the Soviet Union and the United States would upset the balance of power and basic stability in the region, Sri Lanka was responsible for an initiative designed to prevent this. As a result of that country's lobbying, a Declaration was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, in the form of a resolution through which the Indian Ocean (with airspace and ocean floor limits to be determined) was designated as a Zone of Peace for all time.<sup>1</sup> The intentions of the resolution could not have been clearer:

*... calling upon all states to consider and respect the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, from which 'great power' rivalries and competition, as well as bases conceived in the context of such rivalries and competition, should be excluded, and declaring that the area should also be free of nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>*

The initiative is acknowledged as significant because of its substantive nature (previous discussions had focused more on procedural issues) and because it originated amongst 'non-aligned' countries, which sought to offer an alternative to the hegemony of the two main players in the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

As with any agreement of this nature, the resolution was the result of sustained negotiations, having first been supported as a proposition at the Non-Aligned Heads of State Conference in Cairo in 1964.<sup>4</sup> The proponents then worked hard to ensure a convincing vote in the UN General Assembly in favour of the resolution. But they were unable to avoid a sizeable number of abstentions, including all of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the sole exception of China. The outcome was, therefore, inevitable but disappointing, with the intentions of the initiative being largely ignored by the main adversaries in the region. Just ten years after the resolution was passed, one observer could only conclude that:

*... on the basis of the information available, one seems obliged to conclude that the concept of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace has been reduced to a pious wish, or to go even further and suggest that what was conceived as a zone of peace has actually become a zone of confrontation. By 1981, nothing had been achieved in the way of practical measures toward implementing the 'Peace Zone' that had been declared a decade before.<sup>5</sup>*

Although attempts continued, in vain, until the end of the century to persuade its opponents to change their minds, the proposal was already, to coin a phrase, dead in the water.

Given the dismal record of this earlier attempt for a zone of peace in the region, it might have been thought that it would have been allowed to rest. Instead, however, at the Galle Dialogue in Sri Lanka in December 2014, India sought to revive the concept. Although on the previous occasion, the proposal appealed quite widely, especially, to the littoral Indian Ocean states, this time there was less enthusiasm. To an extent it was seen that there was duplicity in India's motives, ostensibly seeking to limit China's activities in the region while at the same time increasing its own naval presence. Additionally, lessons had been learnt from the previous initiative, and it was now widely recognized that the mere designation of a zone of peace was not sufficient on its own to change the plans of great powers.<sup>6</sup> The United States, for instance, was hardly likely to close its Indian Ocean bases simply because a motion was passed at an international gathering to that effect.

The earlier words of one observer in relation to the Sri Lanka proposal are just as apposite in relation to the Indian proposal too:

*It is quite obvious that the attempt being made by certain countries to insulate the Indian Ocean from the world strategic map seems to be an exercise in futility.<sup>7</sup>*

Especially for a small country like Seychelles, this represents a disappointing outcome, based on the *realpolitik* of international relations. It is a hard lesson to take but at least it provides a realistic picture of what is possible; there is no merit in seeing the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, now or in the foreseeable future. Instead, the reality should be accepted and, if possible, ways found for the small island state to navigate a sustainable course across a troubled sea.

## Rough waters

Of those issues which are currently prevalent in the region, some originate within the confines of the Indian Ocean itself. There are some 27 countries located along the continental shoreline and as island states within the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup> As one might expect across such a vast area (the sea extends over more than 73 million square kilometres), bordered by four continents (Africa, Asia, Australia and Antarctica), there is little that these countries share apart from the adjacent ocean. Culturally and politically, there is more that divides than unites them. Nor is there anything resembling a framework of governance to provide a common rule of law; the Indian Ocean Rim Association is the closest to this but, in reality, is little more than an advisory body and source of information on the region.<sup>9</sup> As a result, in spite of its geographical coherence (erroneously shown in the first world maps as an enclosed space),<sup>10</sup> the Indian Ocean is fragmented into as many parts as there are nations (and more when one takes into account divisions within these).

Many of the fissures that scar the region stop at individual borders but, taken together, it is far from being a zone of peace. From the perspective of Seychelles, the most pressing issues with local origins are:

- ♦ the ambitions of India to extend its hegemony;
- ♦ the continuing instability of Somalia;
- ♦ the nuclear capacity of India and Pakistan; and
- ♦ a latent threat of Islamic terrorism.

Each of these issues, in its own way, poses a potential threat to Seychelles. In the background, as well, one cannot ignore the ongoing conflict in Yemen, nor the deteriorating relations of Iran with the Western nations. While these two issues might not pose an immediate threat, they cannot be ignored; the reality is that, like wildfires, wars can be notoriously difficult to contain.

### *Indian hegemony*

If it were a marketing ploy, naming the world's third largest sea the Indian Ocean immediately conveys a sense of ownership. In fact, the name has geographical rather than nationalistic origins, simply recognizing the proximity of the Indian sub-continent, but the present rulers of India are hardly going to contest that.

As an Indian Ocean nation, Seychelles has a close affinity with modern India. When, in the early nineteenth century, slaves were no longer brought from Africa to work in the plantations of French and British settlers, indentured labour arrived from India in increasing numbers. They were joined by traders who could see opportunities in the scattered islands and in due course became the owners of shops, small businesses and construction companies. Currently, more than 10% of the total population is of Indian origin, forming an influential minority; both the President and the Leader of the Opposition, for example, are of this lineage.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the two countries have enjoyed good relations, bringing tangible benefits to Seychelles in the form of training and military equipment, scholarships and government credit. In one recent instance, though, these good relations have been tested to the limit. This is the case of Assumption, one of the outer islands of Seychelles and the scene of a proposal by the Indian government to build what would amount to a fully-operational naval base.<sup>11</sup>

The proposal started in a small and fairly innocuous way, with a plan for a fuelling station for Indian naval vessels patrolling the western reaches of the ocean (which includes the

strategically important head of the Mozambique Channel). In return for the concession, Seychelles was offered an upgraded coastguard facility on the island to improve its surveillance in the most remote part of its designated waters. With illegal fishing a perennial problem, the offer was attractive and an initial agreement for development on Assumption was reached.<sup>12</sup>

Although the proposal had been under discussion since 2012, it only came to the fore in 2017, when the new president (who had not been involved in the earlier discussions) was unable to win the support of the National Assembly.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the question of sovereignty, fears were expressed that favouring India in this way could become a matter of dispute with another Asian power, China, in the course of advancing its own military presence in the region. If that were the case, Seychelles could find itself in the centre of a conflict between two nuclear powers. There are also important environmental concerns as (apart from its own natural qualities) the island is close to Aldabra, a world heritage site. Were it simply for what is there now, few people would have heard of Assumption, let alone visit it; on most days it remains a tropical idyll with white, sandy beaches and a surrounding sea that is rich in marine life. Yet, against all appearances, it has become one of the geopolitical ‘hot spots’ of the Indian Ocean.<sup>14</sup>

Views on the issue circulated across the informal networks of social media and there have been leaks that reveal details that were previously little known. Far from being a modest development to enable refuelling and light repairs, new plans showed a proposed garrison sufficient to accommodate up to 500 naval personnel. And whereas the former president, James Michel, maintains that the original scheme he negotiated was intended to offer access as well to other navies operating in the region, the present proposal is for the exclusive use of India.

In one sense this is a domestic matter, about sovereignty and land use, and bilateral relations with India. But, in the context of other changes in the region, it is much more than that. Although China has maintained a diplomatic silence on Assumption, there can be no doubt that India’s proposal will not have met with favour in Beijing. Behind the scenes, representations will have been made to Seychelles and, one can only surmise, the issue will have been raised during a presidential visit to China in 2018.<sup>15</sup> A way has yet to be found to satisfy all parties but it is not easy to see how this might be achieved. The next presidential election will take place in 2020 and it is unlikely that the future of Assumption will have been resolved by then. If it is not raised as a campaign issue, much will depend on the outcome of the election itself.

### *Somalian saga*

To the north-west of the Seychelles archipelago, as part of the Horn of Africa, is Somalia. Until the beginning of the present century, this largely-desert nation barely featured in the strategic thinking of Seychelles. With most of it formerly an Italian colony, its post-independence history has been marked by a turbulent mix of autocracy, civil war, border disputes and poverty.<sup>16</sup> It is a difficult country to govern, not least of all because of the continuing power of warlords, each fighting for their own interests. In the event, the challenges proved too much and anything resembling fair and effective government gave way to anarchy. As such, it earned the unenviable reputation of a failed state.

Independence came as early as 1960 but from the outset the achievement of a truly unified nation proved to be mission impossible. Following the assassination in 1969 of the then president, his successor, an avowed Marxist, Mohamed Siad Barre, came to power and, with the help of some adroit diplomacy with the main powers in the Cold War, he remained at the helm until 1991. His forced departure in that year was followed by the breakdown of any remaining semblance of civil order.

The next two decades witnessed a succession of human tragedies: caused by devastating famines, an almost constant state of civil war, the invasion of troops from neighbouring Ethiopia in a failed attempt to suppress Islamic militants, and the retreat of aid bodies and peace-making missions in the face of violent opposition to their presence. Even a military campaign by the United States (designed to strike at a stronghold of terrorists) was to meet with failure. Only the former British Somaliland and neighbouring Puntland, both now provinces in the north of the country, sought a more peaceful route, claiming autonomous status in the process but not winning the support of the international community nor of the federal government in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst the rubble of a failed state, with no effective law and order, certain warlords and a new class of criminals organized a dangerous but lucrative form of piracy. Young men were sent to sea in fast but vulnerable skiffs, with the aim of confronting and boarding larger vessels, which were then forced into one of the landing points along the extensive Somalian coastline and held to ransom. Amongst the captives were Seychellois fishermen and also tourists sailing in the outer islands of the archipelago in search of paradise. As a result, piracy had an immediate impact on the economy of Seychelles, with its reliance on fishing and tourism as the two main sources of income. In spite of its efforts, the local defence force was unable to counter the threat on its own. As a result, President Michel raised the issue in international fora, calling for urgent assistance to restore safe passage for all shipping in the region. His call was only heeded when it became apparent to other nations that their own shipping was jeopardized too and that an international response was needed.<sup>18</sup>

Seychelles gained credit for effectively sounding the alarm and it went on to play a leadership role in subsequent negotiations and in developing procedures to prosecute pirates in a lawful way, including the right to hold them in captivity until they could be returned to their own country.<sup>19</sup> More than that, Seychelles played an important role as an active member of a combined defence force that was formed to contain if not totally prevent further outbreaks. For two years, during 2016 and 2017, it was awarded the chair of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia. Given the international membership and importance of this body, this was recognized as a diplomatic achievement for a small island state.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Nuclear neighbours***

It is not a comforting position to know that two of the region's nations – India and Pakistan – are equipped with nuclear weapons, especially given the history of opposition that has characterized the relationship since the partition of the sub-continent after the Second World War. Nor are their respective armouries merely of token size or strength:

*India tested its first nuclear weapon in 1974 and the government committed to 'no first use' in 2003, five years after conducting a second set of nuclear-weapons tests on 11 and 13 May 1998. The intention in declaring no first use was partly to help defuse tensions with its neighbour, which had responded to India's second test with its own nuclear tests the same month. Over the past two decades, Pakistan has amassed 150–160 nuclear missiles, to India's 130–140, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Both countries, moreover, have advanced nuclear weapons, as well as ballistics research and development programmes.<sup>21</sup>*

Tensions between the two powerful nations were heightened in 2019 as a result of two incidents in the contested state of Kashmir. One was the killing by Pakistani troops of forty paramilitary officers in Indian-administered territory. The other was the decision later in the year by Narendra Modi to integrate, by changing the constitution, the Indian part of the divided state into the parent nation. Of more concern to outsiders was the suggestion that India might abandon its long-held policy of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons. If that is carried through, there is the probability that it will simply encourage Pakistan to do the same, resulting in a more dangerous situation in the region.

When Sri Lanka proposed a zone of peace more than half a century ago, it is believed that an important motive was to limit India's supremacy and influence over countries such as its own. The rejection of the idea not only allowed India to continue its nuclear development unhindered but it also paved the way for Pakistan, ostensibly, to balance the situation.

Seychelles is not directly involved in the various conflicts between these countries, especially if they are confined to the Himalayan province of Kashmir. But, if this were to spread into

an outright war, the western Indian Ocean is close enough to be affected by fallout and contamination of the ocean. Although such a scenario seems unlikely, at least in the short term, the proximity of nuclear weapons in the hands of opposing powers is a situation that cannot be taken lightly.

### *Terrorism at large*

Seychelles justifiably enjoys a reputation as a nation of peace: as it is often said, ‘a friend of all, an enemy of none’. But in the global arena, no single nation is exempt from the hostile actions of others. Even in the absence of an outright war, acts of terrorism have the capacity to occur anywhere and at any time. And, as events in the present century have shown, the Indian Ocean has experienced its own share of these.

Modern terrorism is invariably but not exclusively (witness, for instance, the earlier incidents of Tamil actions in Sri Lanka) associated with branches of fundamentalist Islam, directed both to opposing sects (notably, Sunni v. Shia) and to the infidels of the West. It thrives, especially, where there is little or no effective government, with a resultant deficiency of intelligence and armed resistance. Thus, Somalia has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for some of the most violent outbreaks in the region.<sup>22</sup> Al-Shabab is not the only terrorist organization in Somalia but – with strong affiliations to al-Qaeda – it is the most dominant. The group is widely held responsible for the most notorious incidents, as well as operating freely across the country in mafia-style to finance its activities. Nor are its activities confined within its borders, with serious attacks in Kenya comprising a major threat to Somalia’s southern neighbour.

Al-Shabab’s attacks attract revulsion but are not entirely unexpected; two other major incidents in the region are different as they had no obvious precedent. One was the assault in 2008 on a number of venues in Mumbai by a group of terrorists from Pakistan, who made their way to the Indian port by sea. In the event, in a series of coordinated attacks, 164 people were killed, including all but one of the terrorists. Responsibility, however, was placed firmly at the door of India’s neighbouring state and key individuals who had organized the assault were arrested. Apart from the ferocity of the incident, it had no obvious precedent and came as a complete surprise to the Indian authorities and the people of Mumbai.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar fashion, April 2019 witnessed another surprise attack, this time in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka.<sup>24</sup> Islamic fundamentalists were again responsible for the events that took place over the Easter weekend, but, in spite of suspected links with overseas terrorist cells, the incumbents were Sri Lankan nationals. An estimated 250 people died in the various incidents. The terrorists chose their targets carefully, comprising three churches at a time of worship and three hotels with Easter celebrations underway.

It might be thought that Seychelles is beyond any obvious threats but, however remote these are, it would be negligent to ignore the possibility. Seychelles itself has a relatively small Muslim population and relations with the community are benign.<sup>25</sup> But, in the eyes of fanatics, it has to be seen as a predominantly Christian country with strong Western associations and, in its various developments, a taste for opulence. With a limited defence capacity and, traditionally poor intelligence, it could yet prove to be an attractive target for terrorists.

## Global currents

A second set of geopolitical issues stems from outside the region. The Indian Ocean is like an arena, surrounded by a ring of states, each with its own interests. As shown in the previous section, not all of these interests are compatible with those of Seychelles. In some respects, though, the threats to national security faced by the small island state are even more a result of the policies and priorities of external powers, drawn to this region through a mixture of motives. Thus, in addition to the first list, high on the security agenda are the following issues:

- ◆ the growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean;
- ◆ the proliferation of foreign bases in the region; and
- ◆ the unresolved issue of the neighbouring Chagos Islands.

### *The China question*

China is now, unquestionably, a world power and, with its global remit, it is not surprising that it has extended its reach to the Indian Ocean. The main goal for China is the African continent, with its rich supply of natural resources to sustain the Asian nation's growing economy.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, around the oceanic rim, there is heavy investment in the infrastructure of various countries and, more selectively, in their respective defence capacity. The question arising is whether this interest and involvement in the region should be a matter of concern for Seychelles, for the other Indian Ocean nations, and for the rest of the world.

On the face of it, China does not presently pose a major security threat in this area. A ship sailing between one of China's Pacific ports and Seychelles would cover a distance of up to 5000 miles. Logistically, to support a navy so far from its home ports would immediately put it at a serious disadvantage. Moreover, the main route between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean includes a strategic chokepoint in the form of the Malacca Strait. And, to cap it all, the other great Asian power, India, has the advantage of access and numbers to provide a superior maritime force in the region.<sup>27</sup> But, in making an assessment of whether

or not this poses a threat, the crucial factor is not what the situation is now but how it might be in, say, ten, twenty or thirty years if present trends continue.

China, of course, frames its Indian Ocean policy in terms of extending the hand of friendship and increasing trade opportunities for all countries. It offers aid in the form of infrastructure and social development projects, as well as grants and low-interest loans. Over the years, Seychelles has been a grateful beneficiary of this largesse.<sup>28</sup> Local relations are good with the small Chinese community in Seychelles and the presence of a new pagoda in the centre of the capital, Victoria, signifies the vibrancy of cultural links. To add to the strength of relations between the two countries, impetus has been given by the concept of the 'Belt and Road', through which China's economic and other influence will be extended along strategic axes, crossing the sea as well as land.<sup>29</sup>

But, in spite of the present relations between the two very different nations, which have brought undoubted advantages to Seychelles, it would be remiss to ignore the possibility of a future scenario which could look very different. Thus, in the event of a continuing build-up of a Chinese naval presence in the region, coupled, say, with growing tensions with India and/or the United States and its allies, the strategic importance of Seychelles would, inevitably, change. Instead of being simply an archipelago for goodwill visits and Chinese tourists, its location as a stopover point between the eastern Indian Ocean and the coast of Africa would assume fresh significance.

In fact, the location of Seychelles has almost certainly been a constant factor in the thinking of China's strategists. In the autobiography of the first president of Seychelles, Sir James Mancham (himself from a family of Chinese descent), he reflected that:

*Taking account the fact that Seychelles' 110 [sic] islands are scattered over a wide surface of the western Indian Ocean, which includes a valuable oil route, and taking into account that important oil-producing nations are within rocket-striking distance, the geopolitical importance of the Seychelles cannot be underestimated.*<sup>30</sup>

Location is all-important and, seen in terms of the ocean as a whole, Seychelles is one of a number of 'stepping stones' designed to support China's merchant shipping and protect through its naval presence its substantial investments in the rim countries. China has been reticent to disclose details of its strategy but a leaked report in 2014 confirmed what was commonly believed, namely, that precise locations had been targeted.<sup>31</sup> Named in Beijing as 'overseas strategic support bases', it seems that there are plans to build 18 bases across the Indian Ocean. These, in turn, are of three types: one for logistical support in peacetime; a second type for logistical support, warship berthing, aircraft landing strips and onshore R & R; and a third for a comprehensive range of facilities, including large warship weapons maintenance. Seychelles was designated in the second category.<sup>32</sup>

Given the above, while there is no cause for alarm at present, Seychelles will do well to keep a close watching brief on future changes. It is a small nation but even a pawn has a role to play on the geopolitical chessboard.

### *Base motives*

It is little wonder that nations from outside the region recognize the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, which is home to two of the world's most important shipping routes. The one to the north connects the Suez Canal with major oil suppliers of the Middle East, as well as being the main route to East Asia; while the other skirts the Seychelles archipelago and follows the African coastline to the Cape before joining the Atlantic. These both represent lifelines to the economies of Europe and the Americas.

Against this backcloth, the state of Djibouti, has emerged as a key player in the security architecture of the region. Formerly French Somalia, it is located at a strategic point that commands access to and from the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, an accident of geography that has become the main asset of the previously impoverished country. At the start of the twenty-first century, only France had a permanent base there, but this has now changed and one nation after another is vying to join the rush for its own military presence. America led the chase and for years Camp Lemonnier was the largest of its kind in Djibouti, and also America's most important permanent military base on the mainland of Africa.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, France reinforced its historical position with a permanent military presence, as well as making provision for a small German and Spanish facility as part of a broad anti-terrorism offensive. Italy, too, has installed separate facilities of its own, also close to the international airport. Perhaps less predictably, in 2011 Japan added its own presence to the existing cluster of bases around the airport, ostensibly designed to support its assistance in combating piracy off the coast of Somalia. With a decline in the actions of pirates, however, Japan's base has been expanded.<sup>34</sup>

Undoubtedly, though, the biggest change is a result of China's intervention, in the form of a new military base (the first phase of which was opened in 2016) that will be larger than any of the others. Although it was initially framed in terms of supporting naval logistics, the concept has evolved into a more ambitious project, with possible numbers to be stationed there in the region of 10,000. Djibouti is China's first overseas base and it is seen not only as securing an entry point to Africa but also as marking the growing influence of its navy in global geopolitics. Nor is this profusion of bases the end of it. Saudi Arabia has signed an agreement to build its own facility, spurred on not only by the short-term incentive of supporting its war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen but also with a longer-term motive to monitor Iranian plans in the region. Additionally, overtures have been made by Djibouti to Russia and Turkey but, to date at least, these have not materialized.

Although it can be argued that the militarization of Djibouti has no direct impact on the security of Seychelles, the new situation distances the Indian Ocean even further from any notion of a zone of peace. If one of a number of potential tensions increases, the north-western sector of the ocean could develop into an area of conflict into which Seychelles itself could be drawn. Even if it is not directly involved, warring factions could find the location of the small island state important to their own operations. At the very least, it would be better for the future security of the country if there were not this build-up of military resources. That eventuality, however, is well beyond the power of Seychelles to affect.

### *Tug of war*

There is a third issue, with a more direct relationship to Seychelles, that is also shaped by foreign interests. In what is close to the mid-point of the Indian Ocean are the Chagos Islands, remote and, previously, largely ignored as a colonial possession because of its limited economic value. A British colony since the early nineteenth century, it was, until the 1960s, administered from Mauritius (2000 kilometres away); in 1965 it was incorporated into the newly-designated British Indian Ocean Territory (which originally included some of the outer islands of Seychelles). With this change of designation was a recognition that the remote archipelago had strategic value during the Cold War, and a deal was struck with the United States to lease the largest of the islands, Diego Garcia, as a military base.<sup>35</sup> As a prelude to American occupation, the 2000 inhabitants of the 55 islands were taken from their homes and relocated mainly to Mauritius, with a smaller number making a new home in Seychelles. Compensation was subsequently paid to the Mauritian government and the uprooted residents, and the lease with America was restricted to 50 years, the implication being that the islanders could return after that time. In the event, the original agreement with Mauritius has since been contested in the courts but America, when its lease expired in 2019, showed no intention of leaving. As a result, Chagos remains an unresolved issue.<sup>36</sup>

Seychelles is not directly involved but its relative proximity means that the issue cannot be ignored. For one thing, a minority of the islanders (known as the Ilois) chose to settle in Seychelles and they form a small but at times relatively vocal protest group ensuring that their cause is not forgotten. More vociferous are the Ilois in Mauritius, and the government there has repeatedly raised the matter in international courts of law. A key argument is that Britain acted illegally in determining the future of the territory shortly before Mauritius gained independence.<sup>37</sup> Britain has conceded merits in the case presented against it but maintains that there should be no change before America chooses to withdraw. With continuing tensions in the Middle East, and with China's increasing naval presence in the ocean, there is no sign that this will happen in the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup>

Not surprisingly, to avoid being tainted with complicity with the actions of a former colonial power, Seychelles aligns itself with Mauritius. There is no other position that could reasonably be taken, and neither Britain nor the United States has made a diplomatic issue of its support. Because of this, it could well be argued that Chagos is not a threat to regional security, and the dispute will continue to be confined to the various courts. However, while that is true now, it may not always be so. For instance, what if China negotiates with Britain for access to one of the remaining islands of Chagos, seeing it as another 'stepping stone' on the route to Africa? Or, if another power, say Japan, wants to increase its own leverage in the region? In this kind of situation, is it possible that Seychelles could be drawn into, at best, a diplomatic spat or, more tangibly, a military conflict? Rather like the profusion of bases in Djibouti, Chagos is not an immediate issue but it does add another dimension of instability in a sea can no longer be described as tranquil.

## Small is small

Such are the issues that currently define the geopolitical map of the region. There are serious environmental issues too, linked to climate change, overfishing and pollution, but these are the subject of different appraisals.<sup>39</sup> The geopolitical agenda is weighty enough on its own for this particular paper and lends itself to an assessment of what it all means for a small island state like Seychelles. In short, is there a choice? Can a small island state chart a safe course between opposing interests or will the more powerful nations close all the escape routes?

Social scientists have for long wrestled with this question, commonly under the heading of 'structure and agency'.<sup>40</sup> Structure refers to the overarching framework or system (for example, capitalism) while agency asks whether there is any room to move within or even to change it. Applying this to the realm of geopolitics, the great powers are responsible for structure and small island states like Seychelles for agency.

While the scales will always be weighted in favour of the larger body, sometimes the smaller one can spring a surprise. In the biblical account of David and Goliath, the outcome was not as expected. Perhaps for romantic more than rational reasons, the idea of the 'underdog' winning through has popular appeal and, in that vein, portrayals are offered of small island states punching above their weight. To some extent, Seychelles embodies this view of the world, playing a bigger role than anticipated. During the Cold War, the small nation famously accommodated Soviet warships in the harbour of Victoria while, at the same time, allowing the United States to continue tracking operations in the mountains above the west coast. More recently (as shown above), Seychelles played a leading role in marshalling foreign powers in the battle against Somalian pirates, and was subsequently chosen to chair

the international monitoring organization. In other ways, Seychelles helped to draw the attention of the United Nations to the common agenda of all small island states, especially in relation to the impact of climate change. And, through its pioneering work on the Blue Economy, it has earned the respect of nations in urging a new global agenda for the care of the world's seas. These are all major interventions and lend weight to the time-worn argument that small is beautiful.

In asserting its position it has helped that (apart from the recent issue of Assumption, which remains unfinished business), foreign policy issues have not given rise to serious political dissent. This is, in one sense, surprising, given the depth of division in other matters within the nation. During the period of socialist rule, from 1977 until the return of multi-party politics in 1993, the then government steered its own way through the murky waters of the Cold War and the issues that divided the country had more to do with land confiscation and dictatorial control. With the return of a semblance of democracy, the ruling party remained in power (until 2016) and opposition parties were resigned to a reactive role in criticizing and cajoling. But on the main questions of foreign policy (as noted above) there was little in the way of dissent. As such, although a small island state, Seychelles has largely spoken with a single voice.

In fact, Seychelles has done well in making the most of agency and Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel are right to question why this is so:

*How can it be that a country with such limited human and financial resources becomes recognized as a major diplomatic facilitator and as one of the agenda setters in ocean governance?*<sup>41</sup>

To answer their own question, they argue that a small state can be 'smart', with an ability 'to set the agenda, to frame international issues, propose rules and norms, and to provide expertise and problem-solving knowledge'.<sup>42</sup> And Seychelles has been remarkably good at doing this. Similarly, the American analyst, Nilanthi Samaranayake, points out that small island states can exercise their own leverage: they 'have assets that can contribute to regional maritime security, thereby lessening the burden on the great powers'.<sup>43</sup>

But, while acknowledging what has been done, it is surely time to challenge the suggestion that a small state, in itself, can somehow level the odds in a world that is dominated by great powers. The fact is that, when matched against more powerful forces, the scope of agency is undoubtedly constrained. Big might not be beautiful but it certainly calls the shots. For all the arguments about climate change and the call for concerted action, smaller powers cannot stop America from turning its back on the common endeavour; and for all the arguments in favour of releasing territory that was allocated in colonial times, the military

base at Diego Garcia will remain in American hands for as long as the superpower chooses. Nor can Seychelles do much to check the growing influence of, and potential tensions between, the two great Asian powers, India and China; the best it can hope for is to try to chart a middle course, enjoying the favours of one without offending the other.

There is a role for small states in the global arena but it is not one that will change the course of events. The case for agency should be acknowledged but not overstated; structural forces are not easily overturned. That is certainly the case in the Indian Ocean, with its shipping routes that are essential to the world economy, and which the most powerful nations will never allow to be blocked. Likewise, in a nuclear age, those nations with that level of weaponry will always have the loudest voices and will dictate what happens. India and China, for instance, are clearly vying for leading roles, although America will not lightly cede its own hegemony. Similarly, with food security an increasingly important issue, the largest consumers of fish will ensure, by any means, that their own interests are met first and the likes of Seychelles will struggle to maintain access and a fair price for its own stocks.

This is not a story with a happy ending, in which right defeats might. There are no surprises, with little-known actors emerging from the wings to command the stage. In a re-run of the biblical fable, Goliath defeats David in the first round. Small nations will have their moments but, when it really matters, the large ones will remain dominant. One influential scholar on the subject, for instance, acknowledges that ‘islands are used as political pawns – and not just since the twentieth century’.<sup>44</sup> The existing order will resist change, as it has always done, and the chances are that it will remain firmly in place. At most, the framework of structure should at least be recognized, if only to clarify where some movement at a local level might be possible. But the scope for such movement is severely limited. Seychelles has proved itself to be adroit, and on that basis it will survive – but only on the terms of more dominant players. In the end, the cold reality of geopolitics is that small island states are small island states, no more nor less.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Sri Lanka (2016) ‘1971: The Indian Ocean - Zone of Peace’.

<https://lk.one.un.org/7060/en/the-indian-ocean-zone-of-peace>

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly: Twenty-Sixth Session. ‘Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace’.

<http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/UNGA/1971/74.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Misra, K.P. ‘Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: the concept and alternatives’. *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 33, Issue 1, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> O’Neill, R. and Schwartz, D.N. (1974) ‘The Indian Ocean as a *Zone of Peace*’. In *Indian Ocean Power Rivalry*, T.T. Poulouse (ed.). New Delhi: Young Asia Publications, pp.177-189.

<sup>5</sup> Pinto, M.C.W. 'Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation in the Indian Ocean'. First Conference on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation in Marine Affairs in the Indian Ocean (known as IOMAC-I), the final ministerial-level phase of which was held in January 1987.

<http://www.fao.org/3/s5280T/s5280t0s.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Abhijit Singh, 'The Indian Ocean Zone of Peace: Reality vs. Illusion'. *The Diplomat*, 7 January 2015.

<https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/the-indian-ocean-zone-of-peace-reality-vs-illusion/>

<sup>7</sup> Vivekanandan, B. 'The Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace: problems and prospects'. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 12, December 1981, pp.1237-1249.

<sup>8</sup> The Indian Ocean Rim Association contains 22 member states but a number of countries in the region are not currently included, notably, Pakistan, Myanmar, Djibouti and Réunion. Additionally, although technically not a nation, the Chagos Islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) cannot be ignored.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Dennis Hardy 'Challenges of ocean governance: the context of Seychelles', pp.170-189. In *The Blue Economy: Handbook of the Indian Ocean Region*, V.N. Attri and N. Bohler-Muller (eds.). Africa Institute of South Africa, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> In the second century of the past millennium, the Greek mathematician and astronomer, Ptolemy (hailed as the world's first geographer, although some would give that credit to an earlier Greek scientist, Strabo) conjectured that what we now know as the Indian Ocean was really no more than a large, enclosed lake.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Jivanta Schöttli, 'India and the Seychelles: controversy over an island'. *Institute of South Asian Studies*, ISAS Brief No.585, 2 July 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Information obtained by the author of this paper in an interview with the president at that time, James Alix Michel.

<sup>13</sup> When Danny Faure became president in 2016, following the resignation of James Michel, his party faced a majority of opposition members in the National Assembly. Assumption became a populist issue for the new opposition to assert their power.

<sup>14</sup>Jivanta Schöttli, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> In 2018, President Faure made an official visit to China, a few months after a State Visit to India.

<sup>16</sup>*The Guardian* Research Department, 23 February 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2012/feb/23/somalia>

<sup>17</sup> Puntland's claims for provincial autonomy and subsequent separation from Somalia have been complicated by the intervention of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran in the Yemeni wars. See Ronen Bergman and David D. Kirkpatrick, 'With Guns, Cash and Terrorism, Gulf States Vie for Power in Somalia'. *New York Times*, 22 July 2019.

<sup>18</sup> In an interview by the author with the former president, James Michel explained how he wrote to the leaders of every nation, alerting them to the growing crisis in the region and urging them to join in ending the criminal acts.

<sup>19</sup>Lindley, J. (2016). *Somalia Piracy: A criminological perspective*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

<sup>20</sup>Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel, 'How do small island states maximize influence? Creole diplomacy and the smart state foreign policy of Seychelles'. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol.14, No.2, 2018, pp.170-188.

<sup>21</sup> Priyanka Pulla, 'India-Pakistan nuclear escalation; where could it lead?'. *Nature*, 29 August 2019. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02578-5>

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, William Haynes, 'The threat of Al-Shabaab to Somalia in 2019'. *Intelligence Fusion*, 26 February 2019. <https://www.intelligencefusion.co.uk/blog/the-threat-of-al-shabaab-to-somalia-in-2019>

<sup>23</sup> For a factual summary, see 'Mumbai terror attacks'. CNN Library, updated version 29 July 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/18/world/asia/mumbai-terror-attacks/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, *Al Jazeera*, 'Sri Lanka bombings', 2 May 2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sri-lanka-bombings-latest-updates-190421092621543.html>

- <sup>25</sup> The author of a book on the subject, Professor Abdul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim, has estimated a total of some 2000 Muslims in the country. See Ebrahim, A.F.M. (2016). *Muslims in Seychelles: A historical appraisal of their legacy*, Seychelles: iMEDIA.
- <sup>26</sup> China's pro-African policy dates from the end of the last century and gained more recent impetus under the leadership of President Xi Jinping.
- <sup>27</sup> The naval superiority of India in the region is explained by various analysts, notably David Brewster. For instance, Brewster, D. (ed.). (2018). *India and China at Sea: Competition for naval dominance in the Indian Ocean*. New Delhi: OUP India.
- <sup>28</sup> This is evidenced, for instance, in the annual celebrations of the relationship between the two countries, held at the Chinese Embassy in the capital, Victoria. See, for instance, 'Remarks by Chinese Ambassador Yu Jinsong at the Reception to Celebrate the 68th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China', Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Seychelles, 2 October 2017. <http://sc.china-embassy.org/eng/zsgx/t1501141.htm>
- <sup>29</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative is closely identified with President Xi Jinping although China's interest in Africa predates this.
- <sup>30</sup> James R. Mancham. (2009). *Seychelles Global Citizen: The Autobiography of the Founding President of the Republic of Seychelles*. St Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, p.262.
- <sup>31</sup> Prakash Katoch, 'Gadhoo – another Chinese base in [sic] Indian Ocean'. *Indian Defence Review*, 26 January 2018. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/gadhoo-another-chinese-base-in-indian-ocean/>
- <sup>32</sup> A.I.C. Popescu, 'Control of key maritime straits – China's global strategic objective'. *International Journal of Economics and Business Administration*, Vol.V, Issue 1, 2017, pp.92-119.
- <sup>33</sup> Formerly a French legion garrison, the then modest facility was leased to the Americans in 2001.
- <sup>34</sup> Deutsche Welle, 'Japan to expand Djibouti base despite decline in piracy'. *Taiwan News*, 19 November 2018. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3578943>
- <sup>35</sup> Charles Cadoux, 'Diego Garcia: A strategic base'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Diego-Garcia-A-Strategic-Base-1517753>
- <sup>36</sup> Chagos Islands: international dispute and human drama'. *Daily Nation*, 31 August 2018. <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Britain-Mauritius-dispute-Chagos-Islands/1066-4737156-11rjtcez/index.html>
- <sup>37</sup> Roland Oliphant, 'International Court of Justice begins hearing on Britain's separation of Chagos Islands from Mauritius'. *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2018.
- <sup>38</sup> A date was set in November 2019, six months after the court case in The Hague, to abide by the terms of the decision but this date came and went without a response.
- <sup>39</sup> The previous issue of this journal contained a selection of papers on key oceanic issues. Likewise, the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol.14, Issue 3, July 2019, was devoted to papers on different aspects of the carbon capture capacity of the ocean.
- <sup>40</sup> The distinction between structure and agency is an important part of Marxist theory, in which Marx and his followers have refuted the idea that capitalism can be overthrown by anything short of revolutionary action.
- <sup>41</sup> Christian Bueger and Anders Wivel, 'How do small island states maximize influence? Creole diplomacy and the smart state foreign policy of Seychelles'. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vo.14, No.2, 2018, pp.170-188.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Nilanthi Samaranayake, 'Island states in a region of great powers'. In *Sea Change: Evolving maritime politics in the Indo-Pacific region*, David Michel and Ricky Passarelli (eds.). December 2014, pp.63-71, Washington DC: Stimson Center.
- <sup>44</sup> Beate M.W. Ratter. (2018). 'Geopolitics of small islands'. In *Geography of small islands; outposts of globalization*, B.M.W.Ratter (ed.). New York: Springer Publishing, pp.93-131.

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