

# A time-tested relationship

In spite of domestic resistance in Seychelles to India's Assumption Island project, bilateral ties are robust

BY INVITATION  
HARSH V PANT

After all the hullabaloo about the state of India-Seychelles ties in the Indian media, no dramatic deceleration was evident if one looks at the outcome of the visit of Seychelles President Danny Faure to India this week. On the much-discussed Assumption Island project, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested that the two nations "have agreed to work on the Assumption Island project based on each other's rights," Faure made it clear that the two nations remain engaged and "will work together, bearing each other's interests." It is clear that despite the domestic turbulence in Seychelles on the issue, both sides recognise the need to maintain a level of engagement, which their convergent interests in the Indian Ocean region demand.

Beyond the Assumption Island project, India decided to extend a \$100 million line of credit and gift a Dornier aircraft to Seychelles. Other pacts signed during Faure's visit include white shipping agreement, twinning agreement between Panaji and Victoria, Seychelles, cyber-security pact, exchange between Foreign Service Institute and the Seychelles foreign office as well as cultural exchanges. The gamut of these agreements clearly signifies the expansive nature of India-Seychelles engagement, something which was seemingly lost during the furore over the Assumption Island.

In some ways, this was natural as Faure's visit was preceded by his government acknowledging that it would not present the \$500-million Assumption Island agreement for ratification to their Parliament after it came under criticism from the Opposition. The pact was signed in 2015, during the visit of Prime Minister Modi, and was viewed as important in helping India enhance its strategic outreach into the Indian Ocean. It involved the development of an airstrip, jetty, and housing infrastructure for the Seychelles Coast Guard. As explained by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the aim of the project was "to assist Seychelles secure the vast EEZ, including near the Mozambique Channel, located over a thousand kilometres from the main island of Mahe."

The two islands — Agalega in the Mauritius and Assumption in the Seychelles — have been seen as strategically critical for India in the Indian Ocean region as along with an Indian listening post on Madagascar, off the coast of Africa, commissioned in 2007, they can enhance India's maritime domain awareness. India can effectively monitor the



The China factor is certainly an important aspect of Indian outreach in the Indian Ocean region

presence of foreign navies in the Indian Ocean region and at a time when the Indian Ocean waters are becoming contested by the day, this is key for Indian naval planning. France adds another layer to this equation. Indo-French maritime cooperation is growing as was underlined by the recent pact providing for the use of each other's military facilities, including opening naval bases to warships. France's historical relationship with Seychelles could make India-France-Seychelles a key maritime partnership in the Indian Ocean region.

That was not to be, however. Domestic political calculus in Seychelles has sunk the Assumption Project for the time being. But the doom and gloom surrounding the discourse on Seychelles in India is certainly not in sync with the health of the bilateral relationship as evidenced during Faure's visit. Faure has clearly indicated that he remains keen on taking the Assumption deal forward and India has indicated that it will be patient as Seychelles resolves the issue domestically.

The China factor is certainly an important aspect of Indian outreach in the Indian Ocean region. Beijing's involvement in the development of deep-sea ports in a string of littoral states in India's neighbourhood has been a cause of concern for New Delhi. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti last year near the Bab el-Man-

The doom and gloom surrounding the discourse on Seychelles in India is certainly not in sync with the health of the bilateral relationship as evidenced during President Faure's visit

deb Strait, one of the three critical Indian Ocean arteries. And then the acquisition of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka further added to Indian anxieties.

But India's ties with the Seychelles go beyond China. The two have shared a robust defence engagement after signing an MoU on defence cooperation in 2003. India has been steadily building maritime capability of the Seychelles by donating helicopters, maritime surveillance aircrafts and patrol boats. The Modi government has also articulated a policy of striving for better cooperation among Indian Ocean nations as part of its SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative. This policy is embedded in New Delhi's vision "to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues; and

increase in maritime cooperation." As a pre-eminent power in the region, it is for India to convince its partners that it is willing to bear the burden of their security and economic expectations.

As such, despite some turbulence, India will have to keep on persisting in its engagement with its Indian Ocean partners. China's presence adds another layer of complexity in the wider Indian Ocean region, but even if China were not there, India would be facing headwinds from the complex domestic political climate of its neighbours. New Delhi has done well in reassuring Faure that despite the temporary setback on the Assumption Island, it will continue to work with the Seychelles in building its capabilities. Similarly, the Seychelles President was prudent enough to recognise that with or without Assumption, India's role in his country will remain second to none. And so, he has promised to keep on working towards generating a more convergent maritime vision.

The challenge for India in the Indian Ocean region is to keep on persevering in building a regional order that remains conducive to not only its own peace, but also its neighbours' security and prosperity.

*The writer is Professor of International Relations, King's College London, and a Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation. Views are personal.*