

The Role of the Republic of Seychelles in the Indo-Pacific Region



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Introduction

The Republic of Seychelles, an archipelago of less than 100,000 souls, is known for its natural beauty that attracts tourists and its fishing industry, especially tuna. Its Port Victoria lands and transships the most tuna in the Indian Ocean. In its bid to diversify, the Seychelles pioneered the “Blue Economy” concept. The Seychelles was one of the first member countries of the African Union to be graduated to high-income economy status by the Bretton Woods institutions. Its similarities with a number of small island economies in the Pacific present opportunities for closer ties and cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region. This article highlights some areas where a large oceanic state has set examples that can be replicated to ensure the sustainable growth of independent, integral and peaceful islands and coastal states operating as free as possible from foreign forces for the benefit of all countries with interests in the region.

The Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region consists of two highly strategic, contested and trafficked segments of oceans on our planet. These are the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The increasing importance of the Indo-Pacific region is due to the emergence of the Indian Ocean as an increasing epicenter of global trade and commerce. It caters for a significant amount of hydrocarbons, fishing activities, and leisure tourism traffic, as well as container shipping from and for multiple stakeholders.

Following a long period of focus on the Pacific Ocean, the Commander of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), Adm. Samuel Locklear, started to refer to the extended region as the “Indo-Asia-Pacific”. By 2018, PACOM was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. The vision for Washington and its allies (Japan, Australia, India and others) for the Indo-Pacific region is a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” (“The Indian Ocean’s Key Role in the Indo-Pacific Rules-Based International Order” by Nilanthi Samaranyake, *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Dec. 7, 2020). Central to this vision is to maintain this geographical space as one where the rule of law, democratic norms and human rights are nurtured, promoted and defended if and when necessary.

As a country that depends on importation for more than 90% of its essential commodities and was the most affected by the Somali piracy debacle, the Republic of Seychelles has and remains very

conscious and concerned about maritime safety and security in the region. Its past and present existence, as well as its future aspirations, depends on it. That, for example, is why it went the extra mile to play an active role in resolving the piracy tragedy.

The Republic of Seychelles

The Republic of Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands and islets that are strategically located around 4 degrees southwest of the Indian Ocean segment of the wider Indo-Pacific region (*Image 1*). Uninhabited until its first settlement in 1770, the Seychelles has traditionally served as a strategic resting, replenishment and repairs stopover for seafarers discovering and transacting in the Indo-Pacific region.

Custodians to a maritime jurisdiction over 1.37 million square kilometers of ocean (more than twice the size of France), the Seychelles’ vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) overwhelms the totality of only 455 square km of its landmass (*Image 2*). Slightly more than 50% of its landmass is protected as national parks and reserves. Amongst its multiple responsibilities, the Seychelles has played and continues to play a number of critical and exemplary roles in the Indo-Pacific region. They include the following:

(i) To continue voicing the existential threats to low-lying Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and lobby for greater use of the “Vulnerability Index” in this era of increasing adverse effects of climate change

Since independence in 1976, the Republic’s successive governments have consistently lobbied for and promoted the greater

IMAGE 1

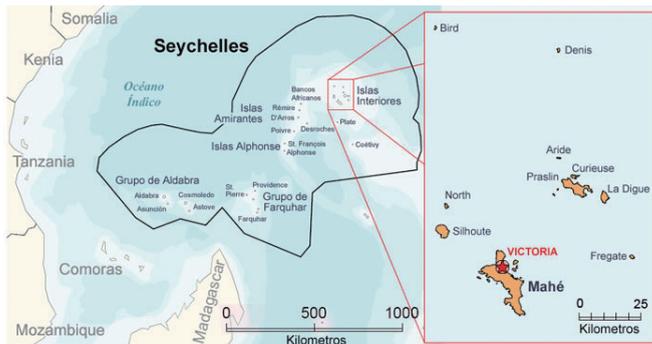
Location of the Seychelles



Source: https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1b_J4pJAPTjyzAZSjg75K5s8_fp_XpJXH&usp=sharing

IMAGE 2

The Seychelles Archipelago



The Seychelles Archipelago of 115 islands and islets within its 1.37 million square km of EEZ. The inner granitic main islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue are the three main inhabited islands.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dcd/Geografia_de_seychelles_ES.jpg

use of the “Vulnerability Index” for island economies. At the recent COP26 in Scotland, the president of the Seychelles made another appeal for the greater use of the index especially for SIDS.

However, the world remains steadfastly focused on gross national products (GNP) and GNP per capita as measurements of wealth, barring eligibility and access to concessional financing and grants for graduated countries to pursue their conservation, adaptation and sustainable development efforts.

Being the first African island state to graduate to high-income economy status, the Seychelles reverted to innovative financing mechanisms to continue its ambitious and traditional environment conservation and protection projects and programs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 14 – “life under water” – after launching its Blue Economy concept.

(ii) Assume leadership in the protection and conservation of its environment

Even prior to its independence, the natural beauty of the islands prompted its colonizers to enact some environmental protective and conservation measures for some of the unique natural assets of the archipelago. The Seychelles was amongst the first countries to roll out its “Environment Management Plan for Seychelles (EMPS) 1990-2000”. The document was presented at the first UN Sustainable Development Conference of Small Island Developing States held in 1992 in Barbados. Even at that time, the Republic of Seychelles had just over 50% of its landmass designated as protected special reserves and national parks.

In 2020, the Seychelles was once again ranked first in the Sub-Saharan region and 38th out of 180 countries globally in the Environmental Performance Index. This marks the country’s commitment and its continuous efforts to improve environment protection, nature conservation and waste management (an area

where it requires the most effort). It is hoped that the long consultative process to legislate the Republic’s “National Land-Use Plan” does see the light of day soon.

The Seychelles is home to two World Heritage sites. First, the *Vallee de Mai* on Praslin Island, home to the unique and exotic *coco-de-mer*, the world’s heaviest nut growing wild in what Britain’s Major-General George Gordon dubbed the planet’s “Garden of Eden”. Second, is the Aldabra Atoll which is highly protected and still uninhabited by man but home to multiple unique endemic species, including over 100,000 giant land tortoises. It has been previously referred to as the “Galapagos of the Indian Ocean”.

On environmental conservation, the Seychelles is a reference country in the Indo-Pacific region and can inspire other islands and coastal states to exchange and replicate strategies and pathways to sustainable development in multiple areas where it has succeeded

(iii) Pioneering and promoting the Blue Economy concept

The Blue Economy concept pioneered by the then President James Alix Michel was being vigorously promoted by the Seychelles as far back as November 2009 when Dr. Keiichiro Komatsu, principal of Komatsu Research & Advisory, visited the country. Michel explained the concept to him and his delegation, emphasising its critical relevance in how to better manage the oceans, to uphold maritime security and prevent conflicts and disruptions, and to promote research and sustainable use of the seabed and fisheries resources, as well as highlighting the importance of promoting the strategic concept globally in our common planet that is more than 70% oceanic.

The Seychelles delegation took the opportunity at the 2012 Rio+20 Conference to introduce and promote the concept amongst its peers. In September 2014 a large Seychellois delegation participated in Blue Economy debates during the United Nations’ Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Apia, Samoa. On their return, the Seychelles government was amongst the first to establish a Blue Economy Department.

With the support of the Commonwealth, it produced its “National Blue Economy Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap”. By January 2014, together with the United Arab Emirates, it co-hosted the first Blue Economy Summit during the “Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week”. Desperate to act on its Strategic Policy Framework, it was necessary to mobilize and secure seed funding. That is when innovative fund-mobilization mechanisms were conceived and realized.

In 2015, the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust (SEYCCAT) Board was set up. The Board was a critical vehicle to realize the innovative \$21.4 million debt-swap that the government of the Seychelles was successful in securing to decrease its national debt by the aforementioned amount against its Paris Club creditors.

The innovative arrangement is known as a “debt-for-adaptation” or “debt-for-nature swap”. It was achieved in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the support of Oceans 5, an international collaboration of philanthropists, which includes the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, that provided a concessionary loan and grants to SEYCCAT to successfully facilitate the debt-swap (“Debt for dolphins: Seychelles creates huge marine parks in world-first finance scheme” by Damian Carrington, *The Guardian*, Feb. 22, 2018).

In return, a firm commitment to protect 30% of its EEZ and enhance its marine conservation status was agreed and implemented through the formulation of the first Maritime Spatial Plan (MSP) in the Indian Ocean (“Seychelles buys back \$21 million in debt from Paris Club” by Betymie Bonnelame, *Seychelles News Agency*, March 9, 2016).

Having successfully secured the debt-for-nature swap, the Seychelles also mobilized funding through the sale of sovereign Blue Bonds (“Seychelles Launches World’s First Sovereign Blue Bond”, *World Bank*, 2018). The Blue Bonds replicate the Green Bond model that governments, development banks and corporations use to fund projects with environmental and climate benefits. The proceeds from selling Blue Bonds were earmarked for the “Mahe Plateau fisheries management plan of the Seychelles” (“Blue Bond initiative to protect marine resources launched”, *International Union for Conservation of Nature*, 2016). Given that the Seychelles is one of the highest per capita fish consumers, the judicious management of its main natural wild stock supply of fish is deemed critical having detected signs of over-fishing in some popularly consumed fish species.

After successfully demonstrating its ability to come up with innovative solutions in funding mobilization, this large oceanic state has also punched above its weight to effectively be at the center of a series of major multinational operations to eliminate piracy threats to critical maritime security, especially during the Somali piracy threat.

(iv) Multilateral collaboration and cooperation to uphold maritime safety and security

The islands and other coastal nations of the Indo-Pacific region have long been conscious that maritime stability, peace and security are vital for their sustainable development. This is evident in the Declaration of the “Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace” initiated by Sri Lanka at the 26th United Nations General Assembly in 1971 – “The General Assembly adopted resolution 2832 (XXVI), by which the Indian Ocean, within limits to be determined, together with the airspace above and the ocean floor subjacent thereto, was designated for all time as a zone of peace” (*United Nations Disarmament Yearbook*, 1983, pp. 375-389).

During the Somalia piracy era, trade routes in the western Indian Ocean were no longer safe. The Seychelles’ fisheries industry, as well as its burgeoning maritime and cruise ship sub-sectors, were

threatened and almost brought to a halt. Being one of the most affected due to its proximity, the Seychelles called for assistance from the whole world. Since all major nations, including China, India, Russia and the United States, were affected, the call was heeded and actions ensued. The successful counterinsurgency against the piracy threat through multilateral collaboration between nations can be referred to one as of the most effective multilateral efforts in recent history. Joint multilateral efforts resumed secure and safe traffic, trade and other maritime activities in the western Indian Ocean.

The Republic of Seychelles was the first country in the sub-region that modified and introduced new legislations to be able to receive, prosecute and incarcerate pirates found guilty in its courts (*Photos 1 & 2*). As its prisons filled up, it went on to secure agreements for the repatriation of deserving prisoners back to Somalia. It also pleaded with all multilateral partners to provide assistance to the returning young men with opportunities to earn a decent living so that they do not return to piracy.

The Seychelles has since hosted the multilateral Regional Maritime Centre for Operational Coordination (RMCOC) in Port Victoria. A number of protocols and agreements were drafted, proposed and signed to ensure that participants in the multilateral efforts continue to share information to keep stakeholders alert to quickly enable reaction in case of a resurgence of similar threats.

The Seychelles’ longstanding “friends to all and enemies to none” diplomatic strategy that served it well during the Cold War continues to serve it as a pillar of its diplomatic policy. In an emerging era of major tectonic shifts in the global balance of power, small economies like the Seychelles have no option but to navigate precariously. However, as testimony of its conviction, the Seychelles continues to turn down multiple offers to host any foreign military bases on any part of its territory.

(v) Upholding a Seychelles free from permanent foreign military presence

From its early days of struggle for independence, the Seychelles successfully averted the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) concept being applied to any part of its archipelago – unlike Mauritius and the Chagos Archipelago. It then said goodbye to a US tracking station that lost its use-value. Ever since, the Seychelles has successfully fended off different offers for the installation of a permanent foreign military presence within its territorial waters from multiple countries. Thus far, the answer has been a resounding “Thank you, but no thank you.”

However, in 2021 speculation about a Seychelles-Indian military base on the island of Assumption was rife. Concerned Seychellois, even prominent politicians and supporters of the newly elected government voiced their objections (“Not in favour of any foreign military base”: Interview with Seychelles’ first Hindu MP Sathya

Photo 1: Seychelles Nation (www.nation.sc), Nov. 24, 2017



Suspected Somali pirates transferred to Seychelles

Photo 2: Patrick Joubert, Seychelles Nation



Suspected pirates apprehended by French naval ship Siroco in January 2014 are transferred to the custody of the Seychelles police.

Naidu, *The Wire*, Dec. 16, 2020).

All were relieved to finally hear the incumbent head of state put the issue to rest in his last press conference in December 2021, where he categorically dismissed all speculation. Responding to a journalist, he said: “If you do not hear anything about Assumption Island, it is because there is nothing further to hear on the matter. Assumption will not host any military base.”

The Republic of Seychelles has a tradition of opting for peaceful resolutions, as demonstrated by resolving a potential territorial dispute with its sister island and neighbor Mauritius, as elaborated below.

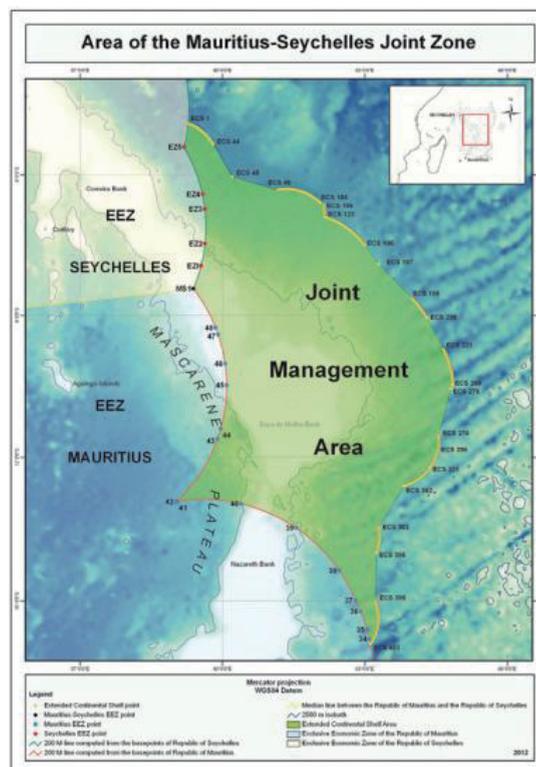
(vi) The first joint management of any disputed maritime area – the Mascarene Plateau in the Indian Ocean between the Seychelles and Mauritius

The Mascarene Plateau is an oceanic submarine plateau in the Indian Ocean located northeast of Madagascar. It covers an area of over 115,000 square km of shallow water, with depths ranging from 8-150 meters, and to over 4,000 meters at its edges. It is the second-largest oceanic plateau in the Indian Ocean after the Kerguelen Plateau (*Image 3*). The potentially resourceful plateau could easily have ended as a hotly disputed area brought to arbitration, as is the case with multiple islands and islets in the Pacific. However, the sister islands decided to take a much more practical and pacific approach.

Both parties discussed and agreed on a 50/50 sharing of all revenues collected as well as a taxation code to apply to the area. They appointed their respective teams of dedicated professionals to interface and manage the plateau. Their successive negotiations resulted in a first-of-its-kind treaty for joint management of an ocean space, signed between the two island nations in 2012. As a result,

IMAGE 3

Seychelles and Mauritius win joint claim for extended seabed



The first joint maritime jurisdiction settlement at the United Nations by the Seychelles & Mauritius Islands of the Indian Ocean was signed in 2012. Source: www.seychelles-eneus.com

both secured additional seabed rights and the underlying sub-soil in the Indian Ocean to add to their respective EEZ jurisdictions.

This approach could be the solution to multiple similar territorial disputes in the Indo-Pacific region where there are a number of similar disagreements that seem never-ending and unsettled. The Seychelles and Mauritius have shown that it is possible to agree on win-win compromises and peaceful solutions.

The tendencies of the superpowers, whether it be the US or China, to practice the “might is right” principle, as in the case of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, continues to persist. Mauritius has won its claim for the return of the archipelago in all courts including the International Court of Justice and overriding support at the United Nations. But all their efforts have to date fallen on the deaf ears of Britain and the US. They continue to operate one of the most equipped and strategically important military bases on Diego Garcia despite Mauritius’ willingness to enact a 99-year lease to keep the base operational.

(vii) Sharing the Blue Economy and eco-tourism experiences for sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region

In December 2021, former President Michel and former Minister of Tourism Alain St Ange were invited to address the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at EXPO 2020 in the United Arab Emirates (which had been postponed due to the Covid pandemic). Following the presentations, the Seychelles was the first country to host the ASEAN delegation on its African tour, led by its Secretary General Dato Lim Jock Hoi from Brunei. He and the delegation paid a call on President Wavel Ramkalawan at State House in Victoria where they discussed future areas for enhanced cooperation and where the Blue Economy and eco-tourism featured prominently. They then exchanged gifts to reinforce existing ties and growing friendship *(Photo 3)*.

This landmark official visit heralds possibilities for enhanced cooperation between the Pacific and Indian Ocean coastal and island states to promote sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region and across the entire world. As a rapid action-oriented follow-up, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Tourism of Seychelles Sylvestre Radeconde has agreed to jointly host the ASEAN-Africa Forum this year, to primarily explore potentials for economic growth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism - <https://www.nation.sc> - Jan. 13, 2022).

Conclusion

In 2015, Sir James R. Mancham, the first president of the Seychelles after independence, published a book entitled *Seychelles: The Saga of a Small Nation Navigating the Cross-Currents of a Big World*. It sums up perfectly the predicament of SIDS that are usually custodians to large EEZs. They must continuously be alert to

Photo 3: Seychelles Nation newspaper



Exchange of gifts between Mr. Hoi and President Ramkalawan (Photos by Jude Morel)

strategic maneuvers. The reintroduction of multiparty politics in the Seychelles in 1992 after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was one such significant, timely and strategic readjustment.

In this era of increasing rivalries, the two sister islands of the Seychelles and Mauritius compromised to offer a peaceful and reconciliatory way forward by agreeing to joint management of the Mascarene Plateau. It is an example with potential for replication and win-win resolutions for multiple maritime territorial disagreements.

The Republic of Seychelles does not shy away from the vital role it plays in ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific” for its own survival in one of the epicenters of global trade and superpower rivalries. It is aware that it is only in a peaceful, safe, and secure maritime environment that it will be able to successfully implement its sustainable Blue Economy aspirations.

The country does not hesitate to learn and share its experiences with the fastest growing region of the world. Most of its commendable efforts range from innovative funding mobilization and its peaceful resolution of potential conflicts to playing active roles in facilitating the elimination of multinational threats close to home.

Finally, its “friends to all and enemies to none” diplomacy ensures its wider reach and ability to independently approach all partners around the globe. Free from foreign military bases, the Republic of Seychelles stands poised to ensure that all stakeholders can partake in mutually beneficial multilateral efforts to ensure that the Indo-Pacific region remains safe and secure.

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