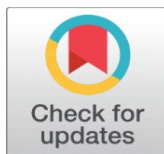
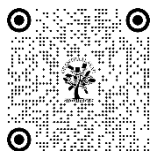


# A STUDY OF INDIA- SEYCHELLES MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

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## ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, India's foreign policy strongly emphasizes the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). As a result, the Island States in the IOR are receiving special attention. Seychelles, among many other Islands, is critical to India's role in the IOR as a net security provider (NSP). India and Seychelles seek to expand their bilateral relationship through collaboration in maritime security. Relations between India and the Seychelles began in 1976, the same year as the Seychelles' independence. Seychelles is an important partner in India's much-heralded SAGAR and an ally in the Western Indian Ocean region (WIOR). Given that the IOR is strategically India's backyard, and is home to important global sea lanes for communications, both traditional and non-traditional threats have grown more severe, thus necessitating extensive bilateral and regional cooperation. Seychelles is navigating through the tough water of balancing between India and China in various strategic issues like that of the Assumption Islands. The region is suffering from non-traditional issues of piracy, illegal fishing, disaster, and irregular migration. Acting as the NSP – India in the past and present has reached out to its partner states through political, economic, and defense alliances. Yet the potential for ensuring comprehensive maritime security cooperation (MSC) is much more and the new academic tilt towards the Indo-Pacific is enriching the Indian Ocean region with multiple state actors. Therefore, the objective of the paper is to analyze various facets of India and Seychelles' MSC and its impact on both nation-states. The methodology adopted is descriptive in presenting the history of bilateral MSC between these nation-states and analytical in understanding challenges faced by these nation-states in the current world order and the impact of India-Seychelles MSC in resolving such challenges.

**Keywords:** Geostrategy, Indian Ocean, India, Seychelles, Maritime Security Cooperation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Asia forms the top border of the IOR, followed by Southeast Asia and Oceania on the east, and Africa and West Asia on the west. As Doyle & Rumley, (2019) weighs the importance of the region to identify it as the "Ocean of the Future" because it is expected to bear half of the world's population by 2050 and has 7 key chokepoints. In his outstanding work "The Social Constructions of Ocean," Steinberg (2001) argues that there have been variations in the social construction of the 'ocean' over time and space. Currently, countries all over the world want to have a presence in the IOR because it gives them the ability to navigate the maritime channels in the region, which accommodates two-thirds of global oil exports, 1/3 of bulk cargo traffic, and half of all container ships worldwide (Indrajith, 2022). Brewster, (2010) has analyzed the historical and contemporary importance of the IOR from the strategic maritime dimension of India. It has also highlighted the cultural and social ignorance concerning oceans in India. With International Relations in chaos and belligerent China as the spokesperson of this havoc, it is time for Indian foreign policy to understand the strategic dimension of Oceans, especially in the IOR, and utilize it to increase its power status in the globe. In this line, Island-States in the IOR become important stakeholders in the region. The WIOR comprises Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles,

Comoros, Reunion Islands, Mayotte, and other coral islands. As per Das, (2019) "India's strategic interest in the southwest Indian Ocean has widened, therefore, the Island- States in the region are crucial for India and the region's security from traditional and non-traditional threats". They provide a ground for establishing MSC in the IOR. In this article, the focus is on India's MSC with Seychelles. India-Seychelles diplomatic relations were established with the independence of Seychelles in 1976 when an Indian contingent INS Nilgiri took part in the Seychelles' Independence Day celebrations. A diplomatic mission was established in Victoria, the capital of the Seychelles, in 1979. Since then, these nations have inked several agreements including Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). The most recent is the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC), Seychelles, and the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) signed in February 2023. It focuses on maritime domain awareness and information sharing. Mishra, (2019) has highlighted the loopholes in India's foreign policy. One is focusing on land borders excessively while ignoring maritime borders and the other is focusing on the East despite sharing historical relations in terms of diaspora, trade, and energy interests with the West. With China's hawkish rise in international politics, India is less attentive to the needs of WIOR and therefore has less academic inquiry into challenges emerging out of the region.

Therefore, the evolution of the relationship in the current 21st century must lead towards forming MSC between India and Seychelles bilaterally and regionally as well.

## 2. INDIA- SEYCHELLES MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION

According to Bueger (2015), maritime security is to be comprehended about seapower, marine safety, and the blue economy. NATO (2011) places more emphasis on economic development and the blue economy than it does on national security in defining maritime security. The African Union's (AU) African Integrated Maritime Strategy is also centered around the blue economy and ensuring maritime security for achieving economic growth. As per Upadhyaya, (2014)- "MSC is a continuum spanning all three naval roles- military, diplomatic, and constabulary". MSC is not restricted to wartime measures but expanded to include joint patrolling, information sharing, increasing maritime domain awareness, etc during peacetime. As per Till, (2006) "there are two models of naval development namely the national navy model reflecting the core of nation-states mandate and the internationalist navy model reflecting a modern globalized approach to tackle multitudes of challenges other than war". Most nation-states have assumed both roles. About India, the 1980s saw the country become more amenable to the IOR's strategic component. The Indian Navy published extensive maritime doctrine in the 21st century. India has assumed the role of the region's net security provider, which has led to the growth of MSC. The notion of NSP is defined thoroughly in terms of providing security, balancing threats, and mitigating all risks, dangers, and challenges in India's updated Maritime Doctrine (2015) - Ensuring Securing Seas. The given role has led to the development of bilateral and regional MSC in the region. Regional Organizations like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), and voluntary initiative- the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) have pan-Indian Ocean reach. In the recent past, India has aggressively pursued MSC in bilateral relations. The zone of cooperation is now comprehensive- ranging from providing assets like surveillance radar systems, surveillance aircraft, and interceptor boats to hydrographic surveys to training to naval officers and naval joint patrols. As per Singh, (2016)- "strengthening engagements with the African Island States is an exact illustration of its strategy and desire for a robust presence in maritime ventures in the region".

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1976, India-Seychelles relations have become multidimensional in their approach. India has built Seychelles' Defence Academy in 1980. A defense agreement was signed in 2003. Under this, India provides a maritime security advisor to Seychelles' President. The bilateral visits began with former President Albert Rene's trip to India in 1980 and former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's trip to the Seychelles in 1976.

Frequent visits of ministers, bureaucrats, and position holders of authority have become the norm. Four agreements were signed during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2015: i) an agreement for the development of facilities on Assumption Island; ii) a memorandum of understanding for hydrography cooperation; iii) a protocol on the sale of navigational charts; and iv) a memorandum of understanding for renewable energy cooperation. These MOUs have helped Seychelles in countering piracy, conducting the hydrographic survey, and ensuring coastal security which was restricted earlier due to the small size of the islands and limited economic and defense capabilities (MEA, 2015). In 2016, India deployed a submarine aircraft P- Neptune. In this year only, India completed the construction of 6 coastal surveillance radars on various parts of the archipelago.

In 2018, Seychelles' former President Danny Faure visited India and the issue of Assumption Island was raised. The dwindling of Seychelles between India and China concerning strategic Assumption Island has been a cause of distrust in the relation. During PM Modi's visit, the agreement on Assumption Island was concluded in 2018 – a twenty-year pact to develop an airstrip and jetty on the Island. The Seychelles government is very clear that this facility is not a lease but jointly controlled by India and Seychelles and therefore Seychelles has the right to cancel utilization of military facilities if India is at war because it is not a military base (Cabestan, 2021). Though the issue has not seen a complete resolution, the partnership is ever-evolving. India's initiative- SAGAR- Security and Growth for All in the Region has emphasized the strategic location of Seychelles. This has ensured a free, inclusive, and secured IOR. In 2020, amidst the pandemic, India launched Mission Sagar to send emergency medicines, and food to Indian Ocean neighbors including Seychelles. Such measures have led to the development of defense and security architecture around MSC between these two countries. It will help both countries to ensure peace in the region by utilizing their geostrategic presence. The geostrategic importance of Seychelles to India is in ensuring regional naval presence in war times and patrolling sea lanes of communication like Bab-el-Mandeb and the Mozambique Channel, crucial for economic and energy security in peace times (Singh, 2021). In 2023, the Indian Naval Ship Sunayna entered Port Victoria to participate in the annual training exercise- Operation Southern Readiness. India has handed over fast patrol boats PS Zoroaster and PS Topaz to Seychelles. Recently India signed an MoU in 2023 with the RCOC, Seychelles to ensure cooperation in sharing information about maritime domain awareness (PIB, 2023). INS Sharda visited Seychelles in 2023 and participated in the IONS Maritime Exercise- IMEX-23. INS Tir visited Seychelles in 2024 to participate in Exercise Cutlass Express (MEA, 2024).

### 3. CHALLENGES

Cordner, (2011) has highlighted non-traditional threats in the IOR. In environmental terms- rising sea temperature is a major issue leading to variance monsoons, drought, floods, extreme weather events, etc. Though difficult to comprehend, such environmental disasters will impact human lives and livelihoods severely. It will also lead to climate-induced migration and depletion in marine resources further enhancing the vicious cycle of environmental degradation leading to economic depletion. Frequent cyclones also led to damages of US\$ 8.4 million throughout the Seychelles in 2013 (Kumar, 2023). Sea level rise is already affecting Seychelles, as very high tides have resulted in flooding, causing damage to roads and public infrastructure. It is also impacting fishing, which is the major source of revenue for the Seychelles. Fisheries accounted for 45 percent of the total revenue, followed by agriculture and tourism annually (World Bank, 2023). Due to the depletion of stocks in current areas and the pursuit of deep trawling, it is anticipated that illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing will expand in the IOR (Maritime Security Index, 2019). This can also aggravate food security issues in the region. The other major threat is regional stability due to failed states further aggravated by active non-state aggressors. Somalia is the biggest example of the failure of maritime security and the Horn of Africa is becoming a mashup of both such threats. The piracy problem of Somalia has proliferated in the surrounding of Seychelles too. The coordinated patrols and early-warning intelligence required to maintain sovereign control over their maritime domains are lacking in many IOR states. The absence of cooperative organizations to coordinate the utilization of limited resources at the regional level exacerbates the lack of national capacities of these island states. However, Seychelles has added maritime crimes to its criminal code. Seychelles has tried prioritizing bilateral, regional, and international cooperation.

The other non-traditional threats are in economic and energy security. It is aggravated by poor law and order situations along with increasing non-state actors' activities like terrorism, piracy, trafficking, etc. The issue of trafficking is also becoming a major concern for the IOR. The maritime routes of the 'southern route' encompass a web of smaller trafficking branches across the Indian Ocean departing from the "Makran coast in the Arabian Sea to the Zanzibar Island and Mozambique Channel; another from the Arabian Sea to India and Sri Lanka, and then on to the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles; and a route from the Arabian Sea directly to Seychelles" (Kumar, 2023, p.224). This has proliferated within the boundaries of the Seychelles, and 10 percent of the Seychelles population is using heroin. Further, the increasing activities of shell companies are registered in the Seychelles as they have reportedly been involved in facilitating illegal arms trafficking from the states as far as North Korea. Notable obstacles to starting and running a firm as well as inefficiencies in the management of the public sector, including a lack of statistical capability, are examples of economic problems. Further, Seychelles is prone to adverse external shocks like COVID-19, the 2008 Economic Recession, the Ukraine war, etc leading to a decline in tourism which is one of the major contributors to the economy in the services sector.

The traditional state-led issues are also becoming prominent in the region. As with increasing inquiry of Indo-Pacific, actors like China, USA, UK, France, and Japan are also assuming roles of importance in the region. This is leading to the encirclement of Island- States with the threat of losing sovereignty to the great power game of international politics. This was evident with the issue of Assumption Island and the role of actors like India and China in it. China has built military hospitals and donated patrol ships and aircraft. Its presence on Mahe and Victoria port increases the suspicion of encirclement theory- the String of Pearls. It also has an economic impact leading to debt trapping of small island nations and finally compromising their sovereignty. This can increase the instability in the region making it the backyard of great power rivalry just like Afghanistan in the past. India has responded to belligerent China in the region by increasing visits, and MoUs, granting assistance, and enhancing surveillance, information sharing, and cultural connectivity. Yet as per Cabestan, (2021) – Chinese economic weight and financial reach are difficult for India to match. It is visible with modest bilateral trade between India and Seychelles and the absence of a direct shipping line. Given the limitations of the Indian Navy, evidenced by the lowest expenditure amongst all armed forces and the smallest personnel available, these bilateral relations are not achieving scales in MSC. In June 2019, the Indian Navy had 67,252 regular active personnel and a shortage of 1446 officers and 12151 sailors (Khalid, 2021). The other major challenge is a lack of academic interface with armed forces, resulting in a lack of literature and data to analyze the exact situation and challenges that armed forces, especially naval forces, are facing in the IOR and how they are countering them. On the part of Seychelles, the issue of limited human resource potential and technological advancement, frequent climate-change-induced disasters, and bargaining between nation-states to get better economic resources restricts building a full-fledged MSC between India and Seychelles.

Despite these challenges, the recent visits by leaders of Seychelles and India have reinforced India's clean, soft power image focusing on the development of both nations economically, politically, and culturally. As per Pant, (2018) – India's ties with Seychelles go beyond China. India has been involved in building the maritime capacity of Seychelles for decades and is not hawkish in its approach following the principle of Vasudev Kutumbhkam that is focussing on developing the maritime capabilities of Seychelles as well.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

As per Cordner, (2011)- "it is difficult to call for global cooperation on the issue of maritime security unless there is an immediate threat like nuclear war". Managing the risks emerging out of the environment, economic, and security-led nature requires MSC. To provide MSC - the geostrategic environment of the region needs to be taken into consideration. It is possible with the development of the concept of regionalism in the IOR. IORA and IOC are such initiatives, but they require vocal and capacity developer leadership. In this line, India must create a pan-African policy that gives African needs and goals a top priority. In this sense, the announcement of the 10 Guiding Principles for India-Africa Engagement has been a positive step. Reducing the delivery gap and fostering a sense of confidence and accountability in Indian project executors are imperatives. Cutting back on bureaucratic red tape and focusing on academic linkages and civil society connectivity can help achieve this. The recent sense of robust bilateral partnership with island littoral states is also a step towards MSC. China's increasing influence in the Seychelles, however, is a "game changer" for India (Cabestan, 2021). As Hardy (2019) puts it, "Seychelles finds itself caught up in this proxy battle of titans," not only in between Sino-India competition but also between US-China rivalry. The need of the hour for Seychelles is to develop MSC at the international and regional levels with state actors and civil societies following the principle of Jambudweep and not looking at itself as an isolated unit to tackle the challenges of the region. It should align with maintaining the basic principle of respecting the sovereignty of nations-states including the Island States and their geostrategic location should not subjugate them to ambitions of great power and great power politics.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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