

Seychelles and the Indo-Pacific

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Does Seychelles need an Indo-Pacific strategy? At the time of writing, the Government of Seychelles does not have an official position on its Indo-Pacific vision or strategy, and yet Seychelles plays a major role, along with other state actors, in contributing to maritime security in the Indian Ocean region, combating various maritime threats such as piracy, Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and promoting the Blue Economy within its extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

For Seychelles, three main state actors in the Indo-Pacific are of primary importance to its bilateral relations: India, China and Japan. Seychelles has excellent bilateral relations with all three countries, which means that when developing an Indo-Pacific strategy or vision, the island nation needs to carefully navigate its position vis-à-vis its commitment to maintaining good ties with the said countries.

Seychelles is geographically and strategically placed between the East Africa coast and Asia. Recently, India wanted to build a military base in Seychelles. Particularly due to its strategic location between Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the island nation is an ideal place for refuelling and replenishment of naval vessels.

Other great powers have also put Seychelles on the map as an increasingly important collaborator in Indo-Pacific affairs; India, China and Japan have all sought to strengthen bilateral relations with Seychelles over the past decades, especially in the area of maritime security, trade, infrastructure development, capacity building and training.

Globally, there has been a great deal of academic discourse, research, and many publications on the Indo-Pacific since this concept was used, or rather resurrected, by the former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, in his 2007 ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’ speeches to the Parliament of India, and in his 2016 ‘Toward a Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ speech in Kenya at the Opening Session of TICAD VI. Japan has been at the forefront of this foreign policy strategy since then, with the latest ‘Diplomatic Bluebook on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2019. Over the years, Japan has worked closely with key Western allies in the Indo-Pacific region (namely India, USA, Australia), through bilateral and multilateral dialogue, to shape, define and formulate the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’, to date, remains ambiguous, and its implementation differs from country to country. Japan puts forward the concept of an Indo-Pacific, advocating for an economic and rules-based Indo-Pacific region, with shared values and principles. In December 2021, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken stated that:

America’s vision [is] for a free, open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure Indo-Pacific region in which all countries are empowered to adapt to the 21st century’s challenges and seize its many opportunities.

(The U.S. Vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific | Asia | U.S. Agency for International Development)

India and Australia are close allies of Japan and the USA in this endeavour, with a shared understanding to promote infrastructure development, trade, new technology, and addressing issues on climate change.

The opening of the first Embassy of Japan on 7 November 2019, in Victoria, the capital of Seychelles, denotes a significant step in the strengthening of bilateral ties between the Government of Seychelles and the Government of Japan. Japan sees Seychelles as an indispensable partner in its vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Japan has undertaken numerous infrastructure projects, in order to expand and prioritize maritime trade corridors in the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific region. Seychelles and Japan have worked closely to enhance Maritime Safety and Security. In 2019, the Government of Japan donated SCR100million for equipment, infrastructure, and capacity building required by the Seychelles Marine Police Unit and Anti-Narcotic Centre (Mfa, 2019). To further demonstrate the growing diplomatic ties between Tokyo and Victoria, President Ramkalawan held a bilateral meeting with Hayashi Yoshimasa, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, and the special envoy of Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan, in Tunisia, on the sidelines of the Eighth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD 8) in August 2022. Japan has also assisted Seychelles in areas of cooperation such as fisheries and the Blue Economy.

China is a key state actor in the Indo-Pacific, due to the volume of trade it generates in the region and its contribution to the development of maritime and land infrastructure in various countries and across several continents, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Kenya to name a few. Beijing has invested billions of dollars, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which spans the Indian Ocean region and parts of the Asian continent, in increasing its sphere of influence both politically and economically. The concept and purpose of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, spearheaded by Western allies, would seek to challenge the growing BRI project, with an attempt to counter China’s growing influence in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

China and India have been key bilateral partners with Seychelles since its Independence in June 1976, and have remained unparalleled in the close ties and cooperation between

Beijing and New Delhi respectively. China in particular, has intensified its scope of cooperation. The Embassy of the People's Republic of China put forward their view of the participation of Seychelles in its Belt and Road Initiative project. Below is an extract of the official communique from the Embassy which was published in the *Seychelles Nation* newspaper:

In 2018, China signed two MoU with Seychelles on 'Cooperation within the Framework of BRI' and 'Marine Cooperation towards Blue Partnership'. Over the past 5 years, a lot of progress has been achieved under BRI cooperation. This year, the Seychelles government sent a high-level delegation to the Third Forum and elaborated its view on the cooperation of maritime, sustainable fisheries and agriculture, etc. It is my belief that Seychelles, as an important ocean country situated at the centre of the western Indian Ocean, can play an important role in facilitating BRI cooperation, bringing benefits not only to the Seychellois people, but also peoples in the region and the world. China looks forward to further strengthening cooperation with Seychelles under the framework of BRI.

(High-quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Together for
Common Development and Prosperity)

It is also important to mention the return of an American diplomatic mission on Seychelles soil on 1 June 2023, which again highlights the importance that Washington attaches to Seychelles in areas of mutual interest, not least in maritime security and capacity building.

The Indo-Pacific concept provides a multilateral platform and common ground for Seychelles to address issues and to find solutions. Seychelles is also an active member of various multilateral organizations in the region, as maritime security, the threat of piracy and IUU is of primary concern to Seychelles. These organizations include the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS).

With the recent attacks on cargo vessels by Houthi Rebels in the Red Sea, a group of countries, led by the USA, has come together to provide security for cargo and merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This new coalition is called the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) of which Seychelles is a member. Seychelles will be providing logistical support to the force. The contribution of Seychelles to this new force highlights the important role that Seychelles plays in the Indian Ocean region, especially in maritime security.

However, in the discourse of the Indo-Pacific, there are two main blocks – the Western allies and China. Seychelles foreign policy backs a rules-based system, based on International Law and value-based order.

The Republic of Seychelles as a state and a subject of the international community, acknowledges, is bound and upholds principles of international law and customs that are fundamental in achieving fruitful and commendable foreign relations. Recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of

states, developing diplomatic and friendly relations with other states, bearing in mind the right of states to self-determination; protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all whilst safeguarding important moral values and the rule of law. Regional integration and or cooperation as a means to enhance foreign cooperation... promotion of bilateral, regional and international trade as a relevant approach in achieving sustainable socio-economic development.

(Foreign Affairs Department Republic of Seychelles, 2023)

Will this foreign policy approach signal a *rapprochement* with the Western allies such as India, the USA and Japan in the Indo-Pacific? China is a longstanding bilateral partner of Seychelles. How would this affect Seychelles-Sino relationships? In this multipolar world, Seychelles will have to navigate wisely and carefully, so as to maintain its excellent bilateral relations with China, Japan and India, whilst pushing forward its national agenda and interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Will the Government of Seychelles develop an Indo-Pacific vision as part of its Foreign Policy? What would be the implications for Seychelles moving forward, particularly vis-à-vis its relationship with Beijing?

At the University of Seychelles, the *James R. Mancham* Peace and Diplomacy Research Institute (PDRI), in association with faculty from Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism – Foreign Affairs Department of the Republic of Seychelles, will be organizing an international symposium on the Indo-Pacific in the first quarter of 2024, in Seychelles. The aim of the symposium is to discuss and explore the underlying questions on the Indo-Pacific and the implications for Seychelles in terms of its security and prosperity. By addressing key questions surrounding the Indo-Pacific as a concept, normative idea, and geography of strategies, this symposium will seek to equip participants with the knowledge necessary for the Seychelles to navigate a multipolar world.

Dr. Ash Rossiter and Dr. Brendon Cannon, both leading academic and experts on the Indo-Pacific will be participating in the seminar. We are also pleased to have the participation of Dr. Christian Bueger, Professor at the University of Copenhagen, who is also well versed in maritime security and geopolitics.

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