

The Battle for the Indian Ocean and Island States

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Russia has taken an increasing interest in strengthening consistently its diplomacy with small island States especially Cape Verde, Mauritius, Maldives and Seychelles. Late December, the Kremlin appointed Deputy Director Artem Kozhin at the Foreign Ministry as the new ambassador to the island of Seychelles, signalling the strategic importance it attaches to this island state of Seychelles with an estimated population of 85 thousand, located in the Indian Ocean, northeast of Madagascar and east of Kenya.

Former Russian ambassador to Seychelles, Alexander Vladimirov said the relations between the two countries have been extremely cordial since the two countries established diplomatic relations following the independence of Seychelles in 1976. Russia and Seychelles have seen remarkable developments between the two countries, including the arrival of many Russian tourists. Russian investors have been investing in the country.

On June 30, 2016, Russia and Seychelles marked their 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Over the years, both have pledged to forge mutual cooperation in many spheres, but little is tangibly visible.

Notwithstanding that little progress, an agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Seychelles waiving visa requirements for short-term trips by citizens of both countries was signed in Victoria, Seychelles, on Sept 2, 2015. Under the agreement, citizens of Russia and Seychelles with a valid passport, including a diplomatic or official passport, are exempted from visa requirements and may enter, stay or transit the territory of the other state without a visa for a term of up to 30 days.

As expected, both countries have exchanged official visits and held meetings at different times. During one of such meetings, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, underscored the mutual interest in and readiness for the development of a joint plan for partnership, including transport and energy between Russia and Seychelles, and that would include the Southern African Development Community.

As far back as March 2015, on the topic that appeared that Russia planned to open military bases in Seychelles, Vietnam, Nicaragua and Cuba, Lavrov vehemently responded:

“It is absolutely wrong. We have no plans to create military or marine bases abroad, but to resolve specific tasks: fighting piracy, pirates have appear in many parts of the world. Our fleet makes long-distance voyages. We agreed with some countries, that our ships use the existing infrastructure for calling into ports for maintenance and small repairs, supplementing food and water reserves, and for recreation of crews.”

Seychelles has over the years, suffered from sea piracy. However, the island is a key participant in the fight against Indian Ocean piracy primarily committed by Somali pirates. Former president James Michel said:

“The pirates cost a great percentage of the Seychelles GDP, including direct and indirect costs for the loss of boats, fishing, and tourism, and the indirect investment for the maritime security.”

These are factors affecting local fishing – one of the country’s main national resources.

As a support base, the island is currently strategic zone for the United States, China and India that are already competing in the Indian Ocean. But Sanusha Naidu, a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Global Dialogue based in Pretoria, South Africa, thinks that it is very strategic for Russia to strengthen engagements with these island States, especially Seychelles.

“Part of this will enable Moscow to have an important maritime security presence from the Indian Ocean Rim on the East Coast to the Atlantic seaboard on the West Coast. This could offer important sea-lanes for Moscow’s economic transactions. But, it also represents crucial footprint to keep up with competitors like China and the United States in terms of geo-political interests,” Naidu explained in an interview in relation to this article.

In July 2019, President Vladimir Putin accepted the credentials of 18 newly appointed foreign envoys, among them was Louis Sylvestre Radeconde (Republic of Seychelles). Putin pointed to the fact that Russia maintains friendly relations with the Republic of Seychelles. It counts on further joint work to expand cooperation including tourism, trade, economic and humanitarian spheres, noting strongly that the tourism sector is the primary industry of that country.

Seychelles is ranked high in terms of economic competitiveness, a friendly investment climate, good governance and a free economy. It has strong and friendly relations with various African and foreign countries. Based on this fact, Professor Dmitry Bondarenko, Deputy Director of the Institute for African Studies, explained to me that “as part of the sustainable efforts by Russia with individual African countries, Russia and Seychelles could cooperate in the priority areas such exploring the seabed for minerals, fishing and seafood processing, aquaculture and marine services (including marine finance and marine biotechnology).”

In an emailed interview for this article, Punsara Amarasinghe, who previously held a research fellowship at Faculty of Law, Higher School of Economics in Moscow and now a PhD Candidate in Law from Scuola Superiore Universitaria Sant’Anna di Pisa in Italy, discusses some aspects of Russia’s relations with Seychelles.

The diplomatic relation between Russia and Seychelles does not have a long history compared to the robust relations between Russia and other African states. Nevertheless, in its brief history starting from 1976, Seychelles had made a rapport with the USSR. In particular, USSR ships anchored in Seychelles and Seychelles supported Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, Russian influence in Indian Ocean waned in the aftermath of the

collapse of the Soviet era and Russia's interest in Seychelles consequently diminished.

Recently, Russia's interest in Indian Ocean and African states have been escalated as a part of its global agenda to restore Russia's role. Especially just a week before the assassination of Iranian General Solemani, Russia participated in a naval exercise along with Iran and China in Indian Ocean proving its interest in the maritime expansion in Indian Ocean.

Amarasinghe wrote in his email:

"The indispensable importance of Indian Ocean appears as a key factor for any state interested in power expansion. It was not an exaggeration that Robert Kaplan vociferously exclaimed that one who controls Indian Ocean, will control the geo-political center of the world. Currently the only active military base of the US is located in Diego Garcia, 1800Km away from the Seychelles. The geographic position of Seychelles is alluring for Russia's blooming military interests and if Seychelles allows Moscow to initiate a military base in the island, the maritime hegemony upheld by the United States will be undoubtedly challenged."

More importantly, the crucial location of Seychelles parallel to African continent makes it a unique destination as a military base. However, realistically we cannot assume the possibility of seeing a Russian base in Seychelles in near future. Indeed, it is true that Seychelles' main port Victoria was opened for Russian vessels for refuelling and other logistical issues. Yet, the same offer was given to many other nations including China and the United States.

On the other hand, Russia's internal economic chaos have significantly hit the military expenditures of the Russian army and it is a fact beyond dispute that the Chinese and the United States military budgets are forged ahead Russian annual military budget. The practical circumstances may not make it an easy task for Russian Federation to build a military base in the Seychelles, even though it has a significant strategic importance, according to Punsara Amarasinghe.

Nevertheless, if Chinese can pursue its fortune in Seychelles, it would be much significant for them as a military access to Indian Ocean and an apt strategic position for maritime Silk road. China has already established a military base in Djibouti and its proximity to the Seychelles will secure Chinese military presence strongly in Indian Ocean challenging the US hegemony. It seems to indicate that rather than thinking of a military base fully controlled by Russia, it is likely to see much of Chinese presence in Indian Ocean, or perhaps, in Seychelles. It will inevitably assist Russian interests too.

Maldives, independent island in the north-central Indian Ocean, while Mauritius is further south, located about 2,000 kilometres off the southeast coast of Africa. Seychelles is ranked high in terms of economic competitiveness, a friendly investment climate, good governance and a free economy. It has strong and friendly relations with various African and foreign countries.

By demographic developments down the years, Seychelles is described as a fusion of peoples and cultures. Seychellois, as the people referred to, are multiracial: blending from African, Asian and European descent creating a modern creole culture. Evidence of this strong and harmonious blend is seen, for instance, in Seychellois food that incorporates

various aspects of French, Chinese, Indian and African cuisine. French and English are official languages. Seychelles is a member of the African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the Commonwealth of Nations, and the United Nations.

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