

Modi visiting Indian Ocean islands in bid to undermine China's influence

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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As part of a broader military-diplomatic thrust aimed at counteracting Chinese influence in the region, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi begins a four-day tour of three Indian Ocean island states—Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka.

Modi had also been scheduled to visit Maldives, a strategically important Indian Ocean archipelago. However, this was dropped from the schedule last week, with New Delhi citing the political turmoil in the Maldives capital, Male, following the arrest of opposition leader and former president, Mohamed Nasheed, as the reason. (See: Sharp political infighting in Maldives)

The military-strategic thrust of Modi's Indian Ocean island tour has been widely commented on in the international and Indian media. A March 4 Reuters article, "Modi to ramp up help for Indian Ocean Nations to Counter China influence," said that Modi will offer the Indian Ocean islands "broad range military and civilian assistance. ... in a bid to wrest back some of the influence China has gained by spending billions of dollars in the region."

The article quoted an Indian Defence Ministry official, asserting that India has a "role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region" and boasting that New Delhi is "providing patrol ships, surveillance radars and ocean mapping for the island states." This, however, has only whetted New Delhi's ambitions. India is striving to "tie the islands into a closer security embrace," declared the Indian official.

Much of the oil and raw materials that fuel China's economy, as well as much of its export trade, pass through the Indian Ocean. Acutely aware that the Pentagon's war plans call for the US and its allies to impose an economic blockade on China, Beijing is seeking to develop close ties with Indian Ocean states, including the island states, by offering to assist their economic development, especially the development of transportation infrastructure.

India has its own ambitions, hoping to carve out, with US assistance, a leading role in policing the Indian Ocean. This would not only boost India's claims to "great power status,"

it would enable New Delhi to project military-geo-political power toward south-east Asia, the Middle East and Africa—all regions where India has significant and growing economic interests.

While India has long considered fellow SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) members Sri Lanka and Maldives to be within its sphere of influence, its focus on Seychelles and Mauritius—which are both much closer to Africa than South Asia—is of recent vintage. Seychelles is 2,800 kilometers (1,750 miles) from the western coast of India, while Mauritius, which lies to the east of Madagascar, is 5,780 kilometers (3,600 miles) from India.

Modi's first stop will be Seychelles, an archipelago with a population of 90,000. While there, India's Prime Minister will hold talks with Seychelles President James Alexis Michel on strengthening bilateral maritime ties. Last November, India gifted a maritime patrol vessel, PS Constant, to Seychelles' Coast Guard Fleet, and in 2013 it gifted the Seychelles Defence Forces an Indian-made maritime reconnaissance aircraft, the Dornier-228, to patrol the country's 1.3 million square kilometer Exclusive Economic Zone.

In December 2011, AFP reported that China had been invited to set up a military base in Seychelles, but both the Chinese and Seychelles foreign ministers denied the report, saying they had been misquoted. Last year, the Russian Foreign Minister denied a RIA Novosti website report which suggested that Russia has plans to create a military base in the archipelago. Whatever the real situation, these reports highlight the strategic importance of Seychelles.

Modi's second stop will be Mauritius (population 1.2 million) where New Delhi already has significant influence. Modi will be the chief guest at the Mauritian National Day celebration on March 12. However, his main focus will be on expanding New Delhi's military ties with Mauritius. India's military recently concluded a survey of Mauritius' defence "needs" and, in line with that, now plans to equip the island state with 13 Indian-built warships to police its

territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone.

During his visit Modi, will commission the first of these warships, the 1,300-tonne CGS Barracuda. Valued at \$58 million (US), the Barracuda is the first warship ever exported by India. According to Commodore Ranjit Rai, a former head of Indian naval intelligence and operations, India has “practically given Mauritius a coastguard”.

The last and most important leg of Modi’s tour is Sri Lanka, where a US-sponsored regime-change operation was recently carried through with New Delhi’s backing, with the aim of harnessing Colombo more tightly to Washington’s drive to strategically isolate and encircle China.

Both the US and India were hostile to the ties that former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had developed with China. India, which considers Sri Lanka its “backyard,” was incensed when Rajapakse ignored its vigorous complaints over the docking of a Chinese submarine on the island.

Maithripala Sirisena, who ousted Rajapakse in Sri Lanka’s January 8 presidential election, and his prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the pro-US United National Party (UNP), have lost no time in demonstrating the new government’s allegiance to Washington and New Delhi. Sirisena made India the site of his first foreign trip as president. Four bilateral agreements were signed during his mid-February visit, including a civil nuclear cooperation pact, which was “welcomed” by the Obama administration.

Underscoring the importance Modi attaches to his Sri Lanka visit, he dispatched External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Colombo on March 6 to finalize the details. According to Indian officials quoted by Reuters, “Modi is expected to tighten defense and security cooperation and push for final approval for a 500 MW power plant to be built by India’s state-run national Thermal Power Cooperation under a 2012 agreement in Trincomalee, a strategic port in eastern Sri Lanka.”

In the run-up to Modi’s visit, the Sirisena government further underlined Sri Lanka’s shift away from Beijing by announcing the suspension of work on a \$1.5 billion Colombo Port City Project being funded and built by Chinese firms. Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera has also pledged to New Delhi that there will be no future Chinese submarine dockings.

Modi’s Indian Ocean island tour take places under conditions where the Obama administration has intensified the US’s decade-long drive to harness New Delhi ever more tightly to its predatory strategic agenda—above all its campaign to thwart China’s “rise”—through a combination of inducements and bullying.

Only last week, the Commander of the US Pacific Fleet,

Admiral Harry Harris, provocatively called on India to take a greater role in the South China Sea while on a visit to New Delhi to meet with Admiral R.K. Dhowan, the Chief of the Indian Naval Staff.

The US has been encouraging its allies in the South China Sea, including the Philippines and Vietnam, to press their maritime territorial claims against China. India, which has offshore oil leases from Vietnam in some of the disputed waters, has increasingly parroted the US line that casts Beijing as a grave threat to “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea. The Obama administration was ecstatic when Modi, a Hindu chauvinist notorious for his hawkish anti-China stance, agreed to the inclusion of US-scripted language concerning the South China Sea in the “Vision” statement he and Obama issued during the US President’s late January trip to India.

Speaking to reporters at the conclusion of his meeting with his Indian counterpart, Admiral Harris launched into a tirade against China, accusing it of “raising tensions in the region,” then urged India to “get in” the South China Sea to assert its interests. “They are international waters” declared the head of the US Pacific Fleet, “and India should be able to operate freely wherever India wants to operate. If that means the South China Sea, then get in there and do that.”

The stated purpose of Harris’ visit was to discuss the 2015 version of the annual Malabar Indo-US naval exercise. As part of its efforts to integrate India into a US-led anti-China quadrilateral alliance involving Japan and Australia, long Washington’s principal allies in the Indo-Pacific region, the US has been encouraging India to transform Malabar into a regular multilateral exercise. Stressing that point, Admiral Harris said, “There is a role for each of our navies to play in building multinational maritime relationships in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.”

In a further comment highlighting the US drive to make India a satrap in its drive for global hegemony, Admiral Harris said that “an enhanced India-US partnership” would help “ensure other nations respect international law and drives our mutual commitment to open access by all nations to the shared global commons of sea, air, space and cyberspace.”

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