

Seychelles opposition alliance rejects India's plans for military base

By Rohantha De Silva
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Long-standing Indian plans to build a naval base on Assumption Island in Seychelles have stalled amid mounting resistance throughout the sparsely-populated 115-island, Indian Ocean nation.

Seychelles is strategically situated in the western Indian Ocean, about 1,500 kilometres east of Kenya. Its 94,000 people live on a group of 42 islands that sit astride east African and south Asian sea lanes, amongst the busiest in the world.

Wavel Ramkalawan, leader of the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS), a four-party opposition alliance, declared on March 22 that it will not ratify the India-Seychelles base agreement. Other political activists also have denounced the deal. The LDS holds a majority in the country's parliament, after winning 15 positions in the 25-seat legislature in 2016.

The construction of an Indian base was first agreed between then Seychelles President James Michel and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2015. The first visit to Seychelles by an Indian prime minister in more than 30 years was part of New Delhi's drive to dominate the Indian Ocean and boost its strategic influence in Africa and the Middle East.

India has promised to invest \$US550 million in the project. This includes renovating Assumption Island's airstrip, upgrading its jetty and constructing new buildings for the Seychelles Coast Guard. Indian soldiers would also train archipelago forces as part of the 20-year agreement.

The Seychelles government hoped that the military base would increase the country's capacity to patrol its 1.3-million square kilometre exclusive economic zone against illegal fishing, drug trafficking and piracy.

Full details of the agreement, however, were kept secret and not presented to the parliament as legally required, even when the Michel administration had a

majority.

Information about the deal was then leaked and published on YouTube. This forced some revisions, including the insertion of clauses preventing India from using the base in times of war and disallowing nuclear-armed vessels at the facilities. LDS leader Ramkalawan declared, however, that the alliance would still not back the agreement in its current form.

If established, the base would dramatically increase India's military presence in Seychelles, which has had a military cooperation deal with New Delhi since 2003. India built the Coastal Radar Surveillance (CRS) system in Seychelles in 2016 and has given the Seychelles Defense Forces three fast-track patrol vessels and one Dornier aircraft.

While the CRS is supposedly assisting Seychelles to combat piracy it also helps India track the movement of Chinese navy and merchant vessels across the Indian Ocean. A March 29 article by Abhishek Mishra in the *Diplomat* noted that apart from assisting "ensure safe passage of shipping vessels," the "base could counter Chinese unilateralism and increasing securitisation of the Indian Ocean Region."

Ralph Volcere, a Seychelles opposition activist, who has led protests against the base agreement, told Al Jazeera that India's principal aim was to "monitor the energy transport of China."

Volcere said Seychelles "cannot afford to be taking sides" in the "rivalry between China and India" over geo-strategic influence in the Indian Ocean. "[The] Chinese also wanted to build a base here, but we turned that down... we don't want foreign military personnel here," he said.

Although the anti-base opposition of Volcere and others is premised entirely on nationalist considerations, it reflects growing popular concern

about the dangerous consequences of escalating rivalry between major powers in the Indian Ocean.

Washington's strategic aim is to diplomatically and militarily isolate Beijing. It has enlisted India as a frontline state in this geo-strategic manoeuvring.

India, however, is facing "a lot of blowback in the region," Delhi-based foreign policy commentator Manoj Joshi warned recently. "China is a subtext in India's troubles in both Maldives and Seychelles," he told Al Jazeera, adding: "China offers a leverage [for small countries] against a big neighbour like India."

New Delhi's attempts to strengthen military relations with Seychelles include offering assistance in health, science and technology, and renewable energy. It has promised also to invest \$8.36 million in various civilian projects.

The Seychelles government is maintaining its political and economic relations with Beijing, however. Congratulating Xi Jinping on being reappointed Chinese president last month, Seychelles President Danny Faure said: "The One Belt, One Road initiative, in particular, reflects China's determined willingness to play a more important role to improve the infrastructure for facilitation of world trade and integration."

India is continuing its efforts to revive its stalled agreement with Seychelles. On April 10, the *Wire*, an Indian-based web site, reported apparent "closed door" activity between the two countries. The report quoted Seychelles Vice President Vincent Meriton who said: "A declaration will be made very soon to find a feasible way to build this facility because the country really needs it."

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