

Modi bears strategic “gifts” to Seychelles and Mauritius

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Today Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will conclude his tour of three Indian Ocean island states—a trip that has been unabashedly aimed at asserting New Delhi’s military-strategic influence and countering China.

Having visited Seychelles and Mauritius from March 10 to 12, Modi reached Sri Lanka on Friday. His is the first bilateral visit to Sri Lanka by an Indian Premier in 28 years. It comes in the wake of an Indian supported, US-sponsored “regime change” operation in Colombo that saw Mahinda Rajapakse ousted as the country’s president by a surprise “common opposition” candidate, Rajapakse’s lieutenant Maithripala Sirisena.

The US orchestrated Sirisena’s candidacy for the January 8 presidential poll because it considered Rajapakse too close to Beijing and the new president has dutifully indicated that he will harness Sri Lanka much more closely to Washington and New Delhi.

Washington has been encouraging India to play a greater role in the Asia-Pacific region, including policing the Indian Ocean, as part of its “pivot to Asia”—its campaign to militarily-strategically isolate and encircle China.

Since coming to office last May, Modi—the head of the Hindu chauvinist and traditionally pro-US and strongly anti-China Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—has tilted India still closer to the US and its principal allies in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia. His tour of Indian Ocean island states is part of this strategic realignment.

In Seychelles, Modi met with James Alix Michel, president of the island chain, and the two formalized various agreements aimed at boosting security and maritime ties.

The first Indian prime minister to visit Seychelles in over three decades, Modi, wrote in the visitor’s book at

the State House in the capital Victoria: “India considers Seychelles not only as a maritime neighbour but as a trusted friend and a strong strategic partner. This visit has deepened our mutual trust and taken our cooperation to a new level.” Talking to the press after his meeting with Michel, Modi announced that New Delhi will give a second Indian-made Dronier sea-surveillance aircraft to Seychelles.

There were also agreements on cooperation in hydrography, renewable energy, infrastructure development, and the sale of navigation charts and electronic navigational charts. Modi specially hailed the pact on hydrographic survey as “a new dimension to our maritime cooperation.” In a clear boost to military cooperation, he launched an Indian-designed coastal surveillance radar system in Seychelles Wednesday.

Seychelles has also agreed to lease one of its 115 constituent islands, Assumption Island, to India for “island development.” Ostensibly, India plans to develop tourism on Assumption Island, but several media reports have suggested that New Delhi’s true purpose is to use the island to develop a listening and surveillance post. Indicating the significance of the Assumption Island project for India, Modi said that it “gives a strong boost to this [strategic] partnership.”

India has decades-long defence relations with Seychelles. At Seychelles’ request, India in 1986 dispatched the frigate *INS Vindhyagiri* to prevent a coup, and in 2009 it sent naval ships to patrol the island nation’s extensive exclusive economic zone. In 2014 India gifted the naval ship *INS Tarasa* to Seychelles to boost its surveillance and patrolling capacity. Since then several Indian ships have made port calls in Victoria.

As part of its moves to secure its pivotal oil and raw material imports and export trade, much of which goes

through the Indian Ocean, China has also developed close ties with Seychelles. Beijing has managed to get Seychelles' approval for using its harbor for refueling and docking of Chinese warships stationed in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations.

Modi's visit to, and courting of, Seychelles are clearly part of an aggressive campaign, undertaken with US backing and encouragement, to counter China's burgeoning influence.

In Mauritius, Modi had talks with President Rajkeswur Purryag and Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth. He was the Chief Guest at the Mauritian National Day ceremonies on March 12 and also addressed the national parliament same day.

In a bid to counter China's moves for developing close ties with Indian Ocean nations through significant infrastructure investments, Modi offered a US \$500 million line of credit to Mauritius for infrastructure projects.

The five agreements signed between the two countries during the visit include one pledging Indian support for improving sea and air connectivity to the Outer Island of Mauritius. Official reports noted the new facilities would "enhance the capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island."

Under an "Ocean Economy" MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) India will gain privileged access to Mauritius and the surrounding waters in exchange for cooperation in exploring, developing, and creating the technology to exploit marine resources, fisheries, green tourism and related industries.

In a major step in boosting India's military ties with Mauritius, Modi on March 12 commissioned the Indian-built 1,300-tonne *Barracuda*, for the Mauritian National Coast Guard. The *Barracuda* is the first-ever warship exported by India. At the commissioning, Modi underlined the deal's significance as part of India's broader strategic objectives in the region: "She [*Barracuda*] will protect your islands and your waters... She will be there to help in times of disasters and emergencies. But she will do more than that. She will also help make our Indian Ocean safer and more secure."

India has now promised to deliver a second such vessel to Mauritius.

Modi urged Mauritius to join with India, declaring

the Indian Ocean to be "at the top" of New Delhi's priorities" and insisting that it is "our responsibility to shape its future."

Pushing for closer military ties with Mauritius, ties that are directed in fact, if not at this point in name, against China, India's prime Minister said: "I consider our security cooperation to be a cornerstone of our strategic partnership."



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