

Seychelles template: On India-Seychelles diplomatic ties

New Delhi has clearly opted for a charm offensive in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The red carpet laid out for the visiting Seychelles President [Danny Faure last week](#) came against the backdrop of setbacks in the bilateral relationship owing to the Assumption Island agreement being put on hold. The pact, to build a naval base on the island, was seen as a major strategic enhancement of India's IOR naval capacities and had been under discussion since 2003. It was finally signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Seychelles in 2015. The deal was to include 30-year access to the base as well as permission to station Indian military personnel on the ground, with facilities on the island funded by India, owned by Seychelles and jointly managed. After Opposition protests about loss of sovereignty, however, it had to be renegotiated and an amended version was signed in January 2018. Even that proved insufficient. Mr. Faure lacks the numbers in the legislature to ratify it, and with the Opposition sticking to its stand he announced in early June he would not be taking the agreement with India forward. Instead, Seychelles would build the naval facility "on its own". Given the blow to India's plans, Mr. Faure may well have expected a cold reception in India. However, both sides decided to walk around the minefields relating to Assumption Island, with Mr. Modi saying they would work on the project "keeping in mind each other's interests". India also announced a credit line of \$100 million for Seychelles to purchase defence equipment from India to build its maritime capacity, offered to finance civilian infrastructure including the official buildings, and handed over a Dornier aircraft for maritime surveillance purposes.

This is good strategy. It would have been pointless to push the Seychelles President for a more concrete assurance on the Assumption Island project, as he has little room for manoeuvre. India had earlier drawn a blank in attempting to negotiate directly with the Seychelles Opposition leader, Wavel Ramkalawan, who is of Indian origin. Until 2020-21, when Seychelles is due for presidential and parliamentary elections, it may not be possible to move the agreement further for ratification; rather than renegotiate or cancel it entirely, it is best to keep it in abeyance. This softer approach adopted by the government is in remarkable contrast to the strong-arm tactics it has used in the past with other countries in the IOR, such as the Maldives. India's very public statements against the Abdulla Yameen government have now led to a considerable setback to its strategic position there, with the Maldives insisting on sending back Indian naval and coast guard helicopters from its atolls. A less confrontational approach in the case of Seychelles, with quiet negotiations instead of public recrimination, indeed appears to have had a more salutary effect.

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