India and its Indian Ocean Policy

Event organised by the *James R. Mancham* Peace and Diplomacy Research Institute, University of Seychelles, held at the Indian High Commission on 17 October 2018.

In the third of a series of seminars on changes in the Indian Ocean, the focus this time was on India. Previous events have looked, first, at Somalia, as a broken state now seeking to mend itself after years of factional wars, terrorism and a reputation as a base for piracy and other criminal activities. Then, in our second event, France was centre stage, showing how history, language and current diplomacy have together contributed to a continuing role as one of the region's most influential nations. But of all with a presence in the region, it is India that requires a special focus, not least of all because it is by far the largest of the rim countries but also because it is facing new challenges.

To provide an overview of his nation's place in relation to the Indian Ocean, the High Commissioner of India in Seychelles, Dr Ausaf Sayeed, made a presentation that was as wide-ranging as it was perceptive. All of this is of great interest to Seychelles as a small island nation in a region of change but also because the islands contain an influential community of people of Indian descent. It is little wonder that the event was well attended and attracted extensive media coverage.

Dr Sayeed (who previously represented his country in places as divergent as Yemen and Chicago), and who has a deep understanding of Arabic culture and language as well as his own Indian traditions, was ideally placed to set the scene. He started with a reminder of the sheer scale of the Indian Ocean – covering 20% of the earth's surface – and the diversity of its rim nations, containing some 40% of the world's population. With a total exceeding 1.3 billion people, India, of course, is the most populous country in the region.

For much of human history, the Indian Ocean has offered a highway for trade and a means of connection between the diverse cultures. In the modern era this traffic has increased to a point where some 100,000 ships each year cross its waters, carrying most of the world's containers and petroleum products. With the rapid growth of Asian economies, the many ports around the ocean have grown to accommodate the extra business. A less enviable

statistic is that that this region is also the world's most vulnerable zone of natural disasters, ranging from volcanoes to earthquakes, from floods to tsunamis, and incidents continue to devastate communities. Another unwanted fact is that the ocean is a locus for piracy and criminal activities, including a trade in narcotics, human trafficking and other forms of smuggling, as well as widespread illegal fishing.

The importance of world trade in the region is balanced by concerns that the main shipping routes are forced to navigate through a number of 'choke points'; for example, the Malacca Strait, essential to ships bound to and from East Asia, and the Bab-al-Mandeb, the narrow channel between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea (and onward to the Suez Canal). While these are adequate in times of peace, it is acknowledged that they can quite easily be closed in the event of conflict. The Mozambique Channel is another potential 'choke point', on the critical shipping route which rounds southern Africa to connect with the Atlantic. Seychelles is not immune to these flows and it is estimated that some 5.8 million barrels of oil per day are carried southwards close to the islands, *en route* for the Mozambique Channel and points west.

The importance of the Indian Ocean for India is not difficult to see. With over 7500 kilometres of shoreline and a vast EEZ, as well as a high dependence on shipping for its imports and exports, the safe use of the sea is essential. This has always been a given but when terrorists attacked targets in Mumbai in 2008, it was time to review the country's maritime security. This in itself is tied into more inclusive collaborative policies in the region, such as 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East', as well as working with existing organisations such as IORA. India has been especially active in cooperating with other nations to counter the incidence of piracy off the coast of Somalia. An agreement has been signed for Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation (TMSC) with Sri Lankaand Maldives involving training and capacity building of maritime forces, regular joint exercises and meetings of national security advisers. An extension of this arrangement to include Mauritius and Seychelles is seen as a logical next step.

Pursuing this regional role, the Indian Navy assists other nations in building their own capacity and engages in joint exercises, as well as sharing hydrographic data. Numerous grants and lines of credit have been provided to support local development initiatives and technical advice is always on hand. In an effort to protect the respective EEZs, white shipping agreements have been signed to show which ships are legally within a country's waters and which should not be there. Sustainability is an important principle and India is committed to the idea of the Blue Economy. The Indian Nation is also ready to engage in humanitarian assistance and examples were given of various operations from the large-scale operation to deal with the impact of the 2004 tsunami to the evacuation of besieged people in Yemen in 2015.

In an important statement, Dr Sayeed addressed the critical question of what India stands for. At a time when people are asking about the relative positions of India and China in the region, this statement is worth replicating in full:

- *India stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces all countries in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity.*
- *India advocates a democratic and rules-based international order that emphasizes on the equality of all nations, irrespective of size, population and military might.*
- *Freedom of navigation and over-flight, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, particularly UNCLOS*
- *Resolution of territorial and maritime disputes through peaceful means.*
- *Stable Regional Security Architecture*
- *Promote hinterland linkages & strengthen regional connectivity*
- *Cooperation, inter-dependence & collective action*
- *Encouraging Developmental Economics in IOR*
- *Freedom of navigation and over-flight, and unimpeded commerce, based on the principles of international law, particularly UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), 1982.*

The underlying message was that the safe passage of shipping in the Indian Ocean is essential for all parties and Dr Sayeed quoted the following from an Indian government minister:
A peaceful and stable maritime environment is critical for the regional and global security… Given the scale and complexity of modern day challenges, the international maritime stability cannot be the preserve of a single nation. It has to be a shared goal and responsibility of all the seafaring countries.

Questions:

Two issues were raised that were seen as being of critical importance:

Q1: What are the relations between India and China?

In the spirit of India's approach to all aspects of the region, the relationship with China is cooperative and collaborative. Dr Sayeed pointed to the numerous visits and friendly exchanges between the two leaders. Since coming to power, Mr Modi has worked hard to foster good relations between the two countries and this has been reciprocated.

Q2: What is the situation with Assumption?

Nothing has changed since this was extensively discussed at the time of President Faure's State Visit earlier in the year. One questioner's fear that it would mark a territorial loss for Seychelles was strongly rebutted as what is at issue is a joint facility. Likewise, another fear is that Seychelles could become caught up in a military conflict between India and China. This, too, was rejected as it is not intended to be a military base. Dr Sayeed pointed out that Assumption is a remote island, far from Mahé, and there are benefits for Seychelles if a local coastguard facility is located there. It is in any case in the interests of both parties to provide surveillance of the critically important Mozambique Channel.