

Modi Strengthens India's Ties With Its Indian Ocean Neighbors

by Ramtanu Maitra

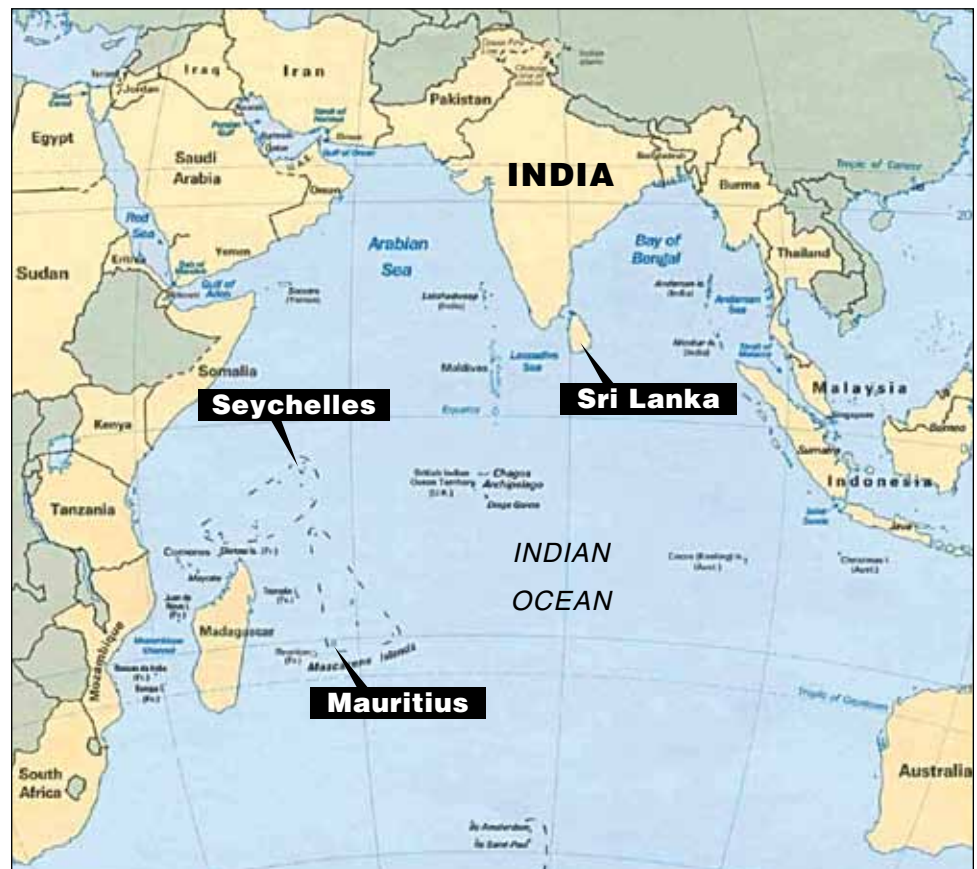
March 16—Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched his foreign policy initiatives to establish India's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean with a five-day (March 10-14) visit to three littoral states—Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka, all former British colonies. Modi's stated objective was to strengthen India's cultural ties with the three nations, and to add strategic content to the Culture Ministry's years-old Project Mausam, a transnational initiative meant to revive India's ancient maritime routes and cultural linkages with countries on the Indian Ocean. Anchoring this are landmark pacts that Delhi has signed for infrastructure development in the Agalega Island in Mauritius and the Assumption Island in Seychelles. These could emerge as strategic assets for India, thousands of kilometers from its own coastal waters, Deccan Herald News Service reported.

The Indian Ocean covers more than 73.5 million square kilometers, and occupies approximately 20% of the Earth's sea surface. It facilitates vast sea-based trades between Asia and the world west of South, South-east, and East Asia. According to the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, the India Ocean's western border is continental Africa to a longitude of 20° E, where it stretches south from Cape Agulhas; its northern border is conti-

nental Asia from Suez to the Malay Peninsula; in the east it incorporates Singapore, the Indonesian archipelago, Australia to longitude 147° E and Tasmania; while in the south it stretches to latitude 60° S.

During the colonial era of the 19th and half of 20th Century, the Indian Ocean and the littoral states were perhaps the most important strategic assets for Britain to emerge as a world power. For this reason, the erstwhile British Empire's Royal Navy had two essential deployments in the area. First, to set up key strategic

FIGURE 1
The Indian Ocean Area



maritime points to command the sea lanes, and second, to position warships in areas of interest. Accordingly, Britain occupied strategic locations such as Singapore, Sri Lanka (then, Ceylon), Aden, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Cape Town, which converted the Indian Ocean into a British lake. Britain still occupies Diego Garcia, which is on a lease to the United States, where the Americans have developed a naval base, military air base, and a communication and surveillance-tracking facility.

Modi's Indian Ocean initiative was not intended to simply enhance bilateral relations with the visited countries but, perhaps for the first time, New Delhi has begun to act on what it has known all the while: that the Indian Ocean is one of the lifelines of the nation, and that this vast body of water cannot be under the control of any one country, as it was when British gunboats and warships, under the pretext of facilitating trade, turned it into a British lake.

Time To Secure the Indian Ocean

Since its independence (1947), India, having adopted a policy of equitable but low economic growth, was mostly concerned about its land security. Most of its security expenditures were aimed at protecting the nation from potential land-based attacks. Indian leaders, during the first four decades following Independence, showed little interest in establishing a strong and permanent presence in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi's mindset began to change in the 1990s, when India began to invest modestly, but with a purpose, to develop its Navy. During these 20 years or so, the Indian Navy has grown significantly, and is now a force to be reckoned with. However, the country's inadequate leadership, particularly during the last ten years, did little to make India's presence felt in the Indian Ocean littoral states.

The need to focus its attention on the Indian Ocean, which is home to important sea lanes of communications and maritime choke points, was largely ignored. A large volume of international long-haul maritime cargo from the Persian Gulf, Africa, and Europe transits through this ocean. Some of the primary items trans-

FIGURE 2
The Strait of Malacca



ported are energy products—mainly oil and gas.

Similarly, the closure of the Strait of Malacca, through which 15 million-plus barrels of crude oil and petroleum products per day flow, could seriously threaten the economies of Southeast Asia and the energy-intensive economies of China and Japan. Due to the geostrategic importance of the Malacca Strait to almost all the South and Southeast Asian countries, any maritime contingency in this traffic-congested region would have profound security ramifications.

India Looks Beyond Its East

Unlike its lack of initiatives to establish a strategic presence among the Indian Ocean littoral nations, India did well in the region to its east, securing the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea that links its east coast to Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. The Indian Navy has set up the Far Eastern Naval Command (FENC), similar to the Russian base on the Black Sea, and when fully completed, it will be larger than the former American naval base in Subic Bay in the Philippines.

Now, with Modi as prime minister, a strengthened Indian Navy, and the initiative of Chinese President Xi Jinping for developing its Maritime Silk Road through the Indian Ocean, it is almost a certainty that India will soon make its presence felt in the Indian Ocean. Whether India's initiative to establish its footprint on the littoral nations was a reaction to Beijing's initiative



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In Mauritius, in addition to signing an agreement to develop infrastructure in the Agalega Island, Modi oversaw the induction of the 1,300-ton India-built vessel Barracuda for the Mauritian National Coast Guard. Here, Modi signs the visitor's book at the Aapravasi Ghat, in Port Louis, March 12.

is a subject of much discussion in the West, and in the Eastern media that follows the West's storylines.

Despite claims that India and China are eager to square off against each other in the Indian Ocean, the fact remains that China and India, as members of the five-nation BRICS grouping, are trying, with the help of the other three, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa, to dismantle the confrontation-oriented old colonial era's unipolar world. In addition, India will soon become a full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a grouping of Eurasian nations involved in providing security to the Eurasian landmass.

On the other hand, there is no question that China is gearing up to protect its energy imports that pass through the Indian Ocean, and will adopt necessary security measures that would ensure an uninterrupted trade to facilitate China's growth, if not its economic survival. Beijing cannot be comfortable under circumstances in which Western powers are the security-providers in the region. It is likely that, to enhance its economic investments in the Indian Ocean region, Beijing will be looking secure its presence there. With New Delhi now looking to increase its security cooperation with Seychelles, Mauritius, and other littoral countries in the future, slowly but steadily, the security of the Indian Ocean will be shifting over to those who live in the region and benefit immensely from the trade that flows through this ocean.

Time To Cooperate

What is about to unfold, to the dismay of the old colonial powers, is that the globe's two most populous nations, with their growing involvement with the world through trade, are now positioning themselves to provide security to each other, as well as to all the Asian countries that depend on sea-based trade.

This is precisely what Modi had in mind, when, speaking at a function following the commissioning of the India-built coastal patrol vessel for Mauritius, in the presence of his host, Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth, on March 12, he touched upon the need for cooperation among the Indian Ocean countries. He said those who live in the region have the primary responsibility for peace, stability,

and prosperity in the Indian Ocean. Stating that the world often defines regional groupings around landmasses, Modi said the time has come for a strong grouping around the Indian Ocean. "But, we recognize that there are other nations around the world, with strong interests and stakes in the region. We seek a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of 'SAGAR—Security and Growth for All in the Region,'" he said, as quoted by Rediff.com, March 12.

During his visit to Seychelles and Mauritius, he signed agreements for the development of infrastructure on Agalega Island in Mauritius and the Assumption Island in Seychelles. The development of these islands' infrastructure could lead to a full-time presence of India's security personnel in the future. But no such agreement was discussed during the visit.

China, in recent years, has shown interest in securing the Seychelles' islands. The Seychelles Coast Guard formally took delivery of the Type 62 patrol boat *Etoile* (607) last June. The vessel was donated by the People's Republic of China as part of its efforts to bolster the tiny island nation's maritime security capacity, and will considerably improve the Coast Guard's ability to police the country's 1.3 million km² exclusive economic zone, IHS Jane's reported. In 2011, it was widely reported that Seychelles offered China maritime bases for refueling purposes while it conducts its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. The reports created a

significant amount of unease within the Manmohan Singh-led Indian government.

The Visits

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Seychelles and Mauritius was somewhat different from his last stop at Sri Lanka. India has virtually no contested issues with either Seychelles or Mauritius, while many aspects of India-Sri Lanka relations were not on an even keel for a while. The new government of President Maithripala Sirisena has created a more positive environment for India, while Sri Lanka's relations with China have remained stable.

In Seychelles, Modi's visit ended with the concluding of four bilateral agreements, as well as the ceremonial switching-on of a surveillance radar system. Addressing the media after his visit to the State House in the capital of Victoria, Modi said: "This co-operation will increase our understanding of marine ecology and resources. We will improve our ability to harness new possibilities of the ocean in a sustainable and balanced manner." The Prime Minister hailed the agreement as a "major step" in advancing scientific and economic cooperation between the two countries.

Announcing the "blue economy"—a phrase used by Modi to describe the marine ecology and marine resources—he said, "This is an area that holds great promise for our nations. The blue economy is all about ownership by regional states of the resources in our oceans around our islands and our coasts." Commenting on the announcement, Seychelles President James Michel said that the willingness of the government and people of India to work with Seychelles in the development of the blue economy concept was very encouraging.

Modi also announced the upcoming donation of a second Dornier surveillance aircraft to the Seychelles Coast Guard to increase maritime security. India gifted Seychelles with its first Dornier early in 2013. "Our security partnership is strong. It has enabled us to fulfill our shared responsibility to advance maritime security in the region," said Modi in his address. "It is a privilege to be a partner of Seychelles in the development of its security capabilities," he said, according to the Seychelles News Agency March 11. Later that morning, Modi also launched the Coastal Surveillance Radar station located at Ma Josephine in a mountainous central



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In Seychelles, Modi signed four bilateral agreements, and attended the ceremonial switching on of a surveillance radar system. Here, he meets with Seychelles President James Michel at the State House, on March 11.

region of Mahé, describing it as another symbol of the cooperation between the two countries.

In Mauritius, in addition to signing an agreement to develop infrastructure on Agalega Island, Modi oversaw the induction of the 1,300-ton India-built vessel *Barracuda* for the Mauritian National Coast Guard. This is the first of such sales to this strategic island nation, which include fast-attack craft under construction in Indian shipyards, PTI reported.

"*Barracuda* is a beautiful ship. She is also very capable and built to specifications of Mauritius.... She will protect your islands and your waters," Modi said after commissioning the ship at Port Louis harbor, in the presence of his Mauritian counterpart Aneerod Jugnauth. "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," he said.

Following the agreement reached to develop Agalega Island's infrastructure, India's foreign ministry said that the agreement "provides for setting up and upgradation of infrastructure for improving air and sea connectivity ... which will go a long way in ameliorating the conditions of the inhabitants of this remote island." The new facilities would also "enhance the capabilities of the Mauritian Defense Forces in safeguarding their interests", suggesting there would be a military spin-off to the development, Reuters reported March 12.



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Previously tense relations between India and Sri Lanka have improved with the recent election of President Sirisena. Here Modi visits a housing project in Jaffna, March 14.

Repairing Relations with Sri Lanka

By the time Prime Minister Modi arrived in Sri Lanka, the repairing of relations between the two countries had already begun. Beginning in the early 1980s, a civil war in Sri Lanka between the Tamil separatist terrorist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), widely known as the Tamil Tigers, and Colombo, had drawn India into the conflict. The Tamils in Sri Lanka drew support from elements in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu. Some Sri Lankan authorities had become deeply suspicious of India's intent.

The civil war came to a brutal end in 2009, when the Tigers were decisively defeated by the Sri Lankan military and the Tiger leaders were killed. The end, however, did not bring immediate peace to the island. The Tamils, who had not been able to act against the Tigers, were not welcomed with open arms by Colombo, and tensions continued. Some of the colonial nations, with Britain in the forefront, began working against Colombo. India drew the wrath of Sri Lanka when the Manmohan Singh government, obviously under pressure from London and Washington, last March, chose to abstain from voting on the U.S.-sponsored resolution against Sri Lanka on alleged human rights violations, instead of opposing it. This furthered mistrust of New Delhi in Colombo.

Subsequently, Colombo's previous government under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, moved quickly to seek China's assistance for some of its development. Indian journalist Dr. Sudha Ramachandran, in a Feb.

26 article on the Diplomat website, pointed out that Beijing has emerged as Sri Lanka's top investor. Infrastructure projects in which China has invested include the \$361 million Phase-I of the Hambantota deep-sea port, the \$1.4 billion port city on reclaimed land off Colombo, a \$500 million-China-owned container terminal at Colombo port, a \$455 million coal power plant, highways and expressways, and a theater. While China's growing economic influence in Sri Lanka irked Delhi, it was Rajapaksa's enthusiastic endorsement of China's Maritime Silk Road project, a vital strategic initiative for China in the Indian Ocean, and China's growing military presence in Sri Lanka—a Chinese warship and submarine docked at Colombo port last year, in spite of Indian reservations—that set alarm bells ringing in Delhi, Ramachandran noted.

Following the defeat of President Rajapaksa in the recent presidential elections, relations between India and Sri Lanka improved. Sri Lankan President Sirisena made it a point to make India his first visit to a foreign country, and during that visit, signed an agreement on nuclear safety that calls for India to help its South Asian neighbor build its nuclear energy infrastructure.

During Modi's visit to Sri Lanka, the two countries signed four agreements to cement cooperation, including a customs pact to balance trade, a credit line of more than \$300 million, a currency swap agreement, and visa on arrival for Sri Lankan nationals in India.

While Modi has not succeeded in overcoming Sri Lanka's apprehensions about India, he must have taken heart during his stay in the flagging-off of train service at Talaimannar built with India's assistance. The rail line is one of the regrettably few major Indian infrastructure projects to have been completed in Sri Lanka in the postwar period. Projects such as the Kankesanthurai port, the Sampur power plant, and the construction of homes have been delayed by tardy Sri Lankan government clearances, but much of the blame for the lack of progress must lie with Indian inefficiency.