

Small Island States in the Indo-Pacific. Challenges and opportunities for Seychelles

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In the capitals and think tanks of the global powers much debate has taken place on the importance of the Indo-Pacific. Increasingly, the Indo-Pacific is treated as a fact, not as a geopolitical regional construct. Discussions focus on how to engage with the new region and designing strategies. Less attention has been paid to what Indo-Pacific thinking might imply for small island states such as the Seychelles.

In the literature, Seychelles is discussed as an important example for how small states can turn their vulnerabilities and weaknesses into strengths, by acting as norm and ideas entrepreneurs, issue advocates, strengthening multilateralism and by pursuing smart foreign policies. In the past the Republic of Seychelles has excelled in this by developing a distinct foreign policy style: creole diplomacy that is driven by the embracement of pluralism and pragmatism (Bueger and Wivel 2018).

The country has a reputation as a key innovator in ocean governance by promoting the blue economy at home and abroad. Also, in maritime security and the fight against blue crimes Seychelles has played a pivotal role in taking leadership and in assisting the international community substantially in tackling the threat of piracy off the coast of Somalia. Will the country be able to continue this diplomatic success story in the Indo-Pacific?

The government has not yet issued a document which would outline its understanding of the Indo-Pacific or what it might imply for the country and its foreign policy. Close attention will have to be paid to several implications of the Indo-Pacific which might undermine its status and diplomatic action space.

As a new regional construct, the Indo-Pacific firstly implies that other more traditional regional understandings are subsumed under it. The Indian Ocean, Asia, Southeast Asia or South Pacific become subregions or are even fully consumed by the new spatial understanding. If Seychelles used to be in the centre of the Western Indian Ocean, it becomes now a country at the margins of the Indo-Pacific. Southeast Asia is in the center of the Indo-Pacific and whether and how the Western Indian Ocean, and in particular the Eastern African coast should be seen as an important part of it, is very much contested.

Being at the margins is not necessarily a problem for a small island state as it can be seen used as a position of power from where to speak and act as a broker. Yet, the same time much of Seychelles regional outlook is that of the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean as a regional project will be one of the key losers of the rise of the Indo-Pacific. It will imply that less resources and support will be made available by international donors for cooperation and programmes within the Indian Ocean. Seychelles hence needs to redirect its focus and make clear, that while it might be at the margins of the Indo-Pacific in geographical terms, it is a central player within the new region in intellectual and agenda setting terms.

The Indo-Pacific construct is grounded in geo-political thinking. That implies a focus on great power behavior and a new preference for bilateral or mini-lateral relations, as evidenced by constructs such as AUKUS or the QUAD. An increased emphasis on the military instrument and signaling by showing

force is another consequence. Indeed, states such as the UK, France as well as the European Union think about the new region strongly in military terms.

Seychelles foreign policy is built on multilateralism, the prevalence of diplomacy, and non-military understandings of security. The shift in thinking implied by the Indo-Pacific is a challenge for these foundations. Acting through institutions will become more difficult, the pressure to take a position for or against one of the great powers will increase, as will military activity in Seychelles maritime neighborhood. Protecting sovereignty and pursuing the national interest will become more difficult in the future or at least require different strategies. Yet, creole diplomacy has coped with such situations in the past. Revisiting how Seychelles succeeded during the Cold War, when it was one of the few countries hosting both the United States of America as well as the Soviet Union, is one line of thinking. Reminding the great powers about the density of military cooperation in the fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia (Percy 2016), when Seychelles provided logistical support for naval operations, could be another option.

The Indo-Pacific is predominantly a maritime region. It implies more attention to the oceans, which might lead to new opportunities for small island states to increase salience for their key concerns ranging from climate change and marine pollution to illegal fishing and other forms of blue crime. So far, the militarization of the Indo-Pacific discourse infers a focus on freedom of navigation and sea power, rather than the key challenges of contemporary ocean governance. A strong voice by Seychelles and other small island states will be required to correct this focus and ensure that strategies towards the Indo-Pacific also incorporate the human security, environmental and developmental concerns of the islands. Fighting illegal fishing and maritime smuggling, responding to marine accidents effectively and climate change resilience are issues that have to make it on the Indo-Pacific agenda. This is not the least to ensure that great powers are continuously reminded that the oceanic issues the region faces can only be addressed through international cooperation and require other solutions than drawing solely on the military instrument (Bueger and Stockbruegger 2021).

Regions are not geographical facts, but constructions driven by political projects. Seychelles and other small island states need to put heightened attention to the political effects of the Indo-Pacific and what it implies for their action space. Rethinking foreign policy strategies, anticipating future developments, developing their own understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a maritime space and raising attention for their concerns in the current debates will be important. As the world drifts into geopolitical thinking, smart creole diplomacy will be needed more than ever.

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Literature

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