

Flowers Are Blooming: the story of the India Navy's secret operation in the Seychelles

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The expansion of India's role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region has aroused much interest in recent years. Many inside and outside India see great potential for India, and particularly the Indian Navy, to play a positive role in enhancing the region's security in the context of India's rise as a major power. Over the last several decades, India has developed good security relationships in the Indian Ocean, particularly with island or small littoral states such as Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar in the southwest Indian Ocean, Oman and Qatar in the Persian Gulf, the Maldives in the central Indian Ocean and Singapore in the east. India is now seen as a key security provider to, and even a security guarantor of, several of these states. However, the history of India's strategic role in the Indian Ocean has not been the subject of a great deal of study. This article will examine India's previously undisclosed interventions in the Seychelles in 1986, which acted as a prelude to other interventions throughout the region, including India's foray in Sri Lanka in 1987 and the Maldives in 1988.

1. Seychelles as a Cold War battleground

During the 1980s the Seychelles and other Indian Ocean states found themselves embroiled in a Cold War battleground. The location of the tiny Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean between Madagascar and the Persian Gulf made it especially prime for US-Soviet rivalry. The United States had maintained a small satellite tracking station there since colonial times. The US also wished to establish a base in the Seychelles to avoid over-reliance on its base at Diego Garcia, something the Seychelles resisted. At the same time the Soviets wanted the US evicted from the Seychelles and to establish its own a base there to match Diego Garcia.

Seychelles was led by a socialist dictator, President Albert René, who had gained power in a 1977 coup shortly after Seychelles' independence, overthrowing the former President James Mancham. Although he had a fondness for Marxist rhetoric, in practice René tried to

maintain a broadly non-aligned stance similar to India's. This included balancing the competing interests of the United States and Soviet Union while maintaining a publicly hostile stance to the white South African regime. René's one-party state also became a magnet for international organised crime and the target for numerous coup plots.

In 1981, the South African security services (through a private company called Longreach) famously organised an attempted coup against René by a group of 44 white mercenaries led by Colonel "Mad" Mike Hoare.¹ The mercenaries took a commercial flight to Victoria, the Seychelles capital, in the guise of a beer drinking fraternity. However, the plot was uncovered at Victoria airport when the mercenaries' bags were discovered to be full of weapons. A gunfight ensued, which ended when most of the mercenaries flew to Johannesburg aboard a hijacked Air India 707. The 1981 Hoare plot caused a major international scandal as the full role of the South African security services was revealed. The South African government was forced to pay a ransom for mercenaries that had been left behind in the Seychelles and placed those that had returned to Johannesburg on trial. However, in the aftermath of the 1981 coup attempt, Seychelles relationship with South Africa improved considerably. The South African government undertook not to threaten Seychelles security and instead developed close security links with many in the René regime.² Seychelles also improved its working relationship with the United States, although René continued, to some degree, his Marxist rhetoric. The Soviet Union continued to provide substantial military aid to the regime, including some 20 military advisors to the armed forces.

Despite its secret rapprochement with South Africa, in the following years multiple coups against René were planned by elements in René's regime, among Seychellois exiles in Britain, South Africa and Australia and by assorted anti-communists in Pretoria and Washington. Beset by plots, President René turned to India as a security provider, seeking

¹ For an entertaining account of the attempted coup, see Mike Hoare, *The Seychelles Affair* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

² See Stephen Ellis, "Africa and International Corruption: The Strange Case of South Africa and Seychelles," *African Affairs* (1996), 95, pp.165-196

a commitment from Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to intervene against any coups. René commented that India was “the awkward grandfather of the region. India would like to play a big role, but it has a complex, that people will say they’re being imperialistic ...India should say ‘we’re not going to let that nonsense go on.’”³ India responded cautiously. When Indira Gandhi was asked to give a public commitment to intervene in a coup against René she declined, commenting, “we don’t think it would be wise.”⁴

Nevertheless in the following years, India provided two helicopters, training and technicians to the tiny Seychelles air force. The Indian navy also regularly sent an Indian naval vessel to attend Seychelles’ Independence Day celebrations. In 1984, Captain Ranjit B. Rai, one of the authors of this article, attended the celebrations in command of INS *Vindhaygiri*, accompanied by INS *Rajput* under the command of Captain PS Das and the Fleet Commander Rear Admiral IJS Khurana. The Seychelles Minister of Defence, Ogilvy Berlouis, was invited on board and later, together with his charming wife, entertained Indian officers at his home after the traditional Independence Day parade. Visiting ship’s officers customarily familiarised themselves with the Seychelles geography and its leadership, later providing intelligence reports and a letter of proceedings on the visit, standard procedures inherited from the Royal Navy.

2. India asserts a role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region

From the early 1980s, India had begun asserting a broad security role in the Indian Ocean region. In 1981, the Indian Navy made advanced preparations to intervene to support Mauritian Prime Minister Ramgoolam against a feared coup by the Muslim-based Mauritian Militant Movement. The Indian Navy began loading equipment in Mumbai for an army expeditionary force to Mauritius, although the operation did not proceed due to political caution and logistical problems – among other things there were concerns that the Indian

³ Selig S. Harrison, K. Subrahmanyam, *Superpower rivalry in the Indian Ocean : Indian and American perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.263.

⁴ Ibid. Only days earlier, in August 1982, René’s Tanzanian bodyguard had quelled an army mutiny, while the Soviets had brought two destroyers into Victoria Harbour as a show of support.

Navy did not then have sufficient operational resources to project power at that distance. In 1984, on the orders of Indira Gandhi, the Indian Army and Navy also began contingency planning for an intervention in Sri Lanka in support of an independent Tamil state. This was apparently leaked to the Sri Lankan government, leading it to scale down military operations against the Tamil insurgents.

The assassination of Indira Gandhi and appointment of Rajiv Gandhi as Indian Prime Minister in 1984 was followed by an almost unprecedented level of security activity by India. In South Asia, the Indian armed forces undertook a massive game of brinkmanship with Pakistan (Exercise *Brasstacks* -1986) under the swashbuckling Army Chief, General K.Sundarji, which nearly brought India and Pakistan to war. In March 1987, the army began challenging China through a complicated series of deployments in the Himalayas (Exercise *Checkerboard*). In July 1987, Rajiv Gandhi made a hurried and ill-fated commitment of peacekeeping forces in the Sri Lankan civil war (Operation *Pawan*). The intervention was intended to enforce a negotiated solution to civil war and guarantee political autonomy for Sri Lankan Tamils. However, Indian forces, which ultimately numbered some 80,000 troops plus elements of the Indian Navy and Air Force, soon found themselves in a full scale conflict with Tamil insurgents and began to suffer heavy losses.⁵

India was also stretching its strategic and diplomatic legs elsewhere in the Indian Ocean, marking a major break from India's long opposition to military interventions outside of South Asia. From the mid 1980s, the India Navy's growing capabilities gave it new options. As Admiral RH Tahiliani, the former Chief of Naval Staff, commented at the time: "We must take the responsibility that size imposes on us, without having any hegemonistic aspirations. Coming to the help of a small neighbour is a responsibility, but we have no intention of

⁵ For a description of India's intervention in Sri Lanka, see Alan J. Bullion, *India, Sri Lanka and the Tamil crisis, 1976-1994 : an international perspective* (London: Pinter, 1995. Although the Indian Navy actively participated in Operation *Pawan* against the Tamil insurgents, transporting men and materials for the Indian Army, no ship was damaged and the navy suffered no casualties.

spreading our sphere of influence.”⁶ As will be discussed below, in 1986, the Indian Navy secretly intervened in the Seychelles to head off an attempted coup. In early 1987, the Indian Navy began patrolling the Mozambique Channel to interdict the supply by sea of South African-backed RENAMO insurgents fighting the Mozambique government.⁷ In November 1988, following a request by the Maldivian President, India flew a battalion of paratroops to the Maldives, making a daring landing at Malé airport to avert an attempted coup by Tamil mercenaries (Operation *Cactus*). The Indian forces quickly defeated the rebels and were able to secure the Maldives capital without any Indian casualties. Two Indian frigates, the INS *Godavari* and INS *Betwa*, later captured fleeing mercenaries at sea.⁸ The Indian government consulted both the United States and Britain prior to its intervention in the 1988 Maldives coup, with Margaret Thatcher reportedly commenting: “Thank God for India: President Gayoom’s government has been saved. We could not have assembled and dispatched a force from here in good time to help him.”⁹ Most of the Indian troops were quickly withdrawn after order had been restored, with around 150 troops remaining for a year after the attempted coup.

India’s unprecedented level of activity in the Indian Ocean region only lasted for several years and ended after Indian troops were withdrawn from Sri Lanka in early 1990 after failing to quell the Tamil insurgency. India’s intervention in Sri Lanka, involving Indian losses of approximately 1400 dead, become known as “India’s Vietnam.” Rajiv Gandhi was

⁶ Quoted in Raju G.C.Thomas, “The Sources of Indian Naval Expansion,” in Robert H.Bruce, *The Modern Indian Navy and the Indian Ocean: Developments and Implications* (Perth: Centre for Indian Ocean Regional Studies, 1989), pp.95-108.

⁷ The Indian Ocean Newsletter, 14 March 1987, p.3. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had earlier deflected suggestions that Indian troops be deployed to protect Indian workers on the Beira railway line.

⁸ For an account of Operation *Cactus*, see Ramesh Trivedi, *India’s relations with her neighbours* (Delhi: Isha Books, 2008).

⁹ Quoted in Gordon, Sandy with Desmond Ball, Paul Dibb and Amin Saikal, 1996, *Security and Security Building in the Indian Ocean* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre), pp.55-6.

subsequently assassinated by Tamil extremists in May 1991 in retribution for his role in the operation. India found that foreign interventions can sometimes carry a big cost.

3. India's intervention in the Seychelles

India had taken an active security role in the Indian Ocean since the mid 1980s. In 1986, India's security role in Seychelles crystallised over a series of coup attempts against President René led by the Seychelles Minister of Defence, Ogilvy Berlouis. Many of the details of these coup attempts remain unclear, perhaps because more than one coup was apparently being organised at the time.¹⁰ According to some reports, the Berlouis plot, codenamed Operation *Distant Lash*, involved some 30 mercenaries and 350 Seychellois (although Indian sources believe this was an overestimate). Some claim that it had the support of South African intelligence and of prominent anti-communists in Washington.¹¹ Berlouis had been invited to the Pentagon in 1985 and, according to one report some in the US security establishment saw Berlouis as a potential future president of the islands, recognising in him an ambitious man with no ideological baggage despite his tenure of a senior post of the René government.¹² However, it seems that there was some ambivalence in the Reagan administration about any moves against René, fearing that Seychelles could be destabilised by the installation of a new leader.¹³ Since the 1981 attempted coup, René

¹⁰ For example, at about the same time in 1986, Peter Drummond, a Sydney organized crime figure was recruited by an associate of the former President Mancham to organise a six or seven man assault team to take control of a prison in the Seychelles, free the political prisoners and then take control of key areas on the main island. The coup was planned to take place in October 1986, but in the meantime Drummond was arrested by Australian police on murder charges. See "Plan for Islands Coup," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 November 1986.

¹¹ David Hebditch and Ken Connor, *How to Stage a Military Coup: From Planning to Execution* (London: Greenhill, 2005), p.155.

¹² Stephen Ellis, "Africa and International Corruption: The Strange Case of South Africa and Seychelles," *African Affairs* (1996), 95, pp.165-196 at p.189. Berlouis was also embroiled in kickbacks.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.190.

had mended fences with South Africa and the United States: he was increasingly viewed as someone who they could work with and in late 1985 had agreed to extend the US lease on the satellite tracking station.

Nevertheless, in early June 1986, Berlouis and his co-conspirators decided to move against René. When New Delhi was informed of an impending coup by either Indian or Soviet sources, Prime Minister Gandhi (who was also Minister of Defence) and the junior Defence Minister, Arun Singh, personally contacted the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral RH Tahiliani, with a verbal request to provide assistance to René. Coincidentally, the Indian Navy had already dispatched the INS *Vindhyagiri* under Captain S. Ramsagar on a scheduled visit to Seychelles to participate in Seychelles Independence Day celebrations. It was decided that on arrival *Vindhyagiri* would report an engineering defect requiring an extended stay in Port Victoria. The Director of Naval Intelligence and Director of Naval Operations then briefed a Commodore who was sent to the Seychelles on a commercial airline to command the operation and ostensibly take charge of repairing the ship. A local engineering company was also enlisted to make some minor repairs. An Indian Navy “engineering” team of 20 sailors trained in weapons was readied for dispatch to Port Victoria, although their presence was not ultimately required. The Indian Navy gave the operation the codename *Flowers Are Blooming*.

In the meantime, René repaired to the Presidential Palace under the protection of his 50-strong North Korean bodyguard while the INS *Vindhyagiri* remained at Port Victoria for 12 days, making great use of its Sea King to provide public displays of helicopter commando “slithering” and assaults. The ship regularly trained its 4.5 inch gun on power mode as a demonstration to the coup plotters. Also present in Port Victoria was a Soviet Turya class patrol boat, the *Zoroaster*, which was due to be handed over to the Seychelles.¹⁴ The *Zoroaster’s* captain was junior in rank to the *Vindhyagiri’s* captain. At one stage the *Zoroaster* left Port Victoria on patrol in response to a report that two Royal Naval vessels

¹⁴ Although the *Zoroaster* was formally handed over in late June 1986, the Soviet crew remained in the Seychelles until 1987.

intended to enter the port in support of the planned coup.¹⁵ By mid June the planned coup had been averted. Seychellois authorities – with the likely assistance of Indian security services - arrested six men (but not Berlouis). Indian sources believe that the presence of an Indian naval vessel made a significant contribution to averting a coup. As a former Indian intelligence officer who was in the Seychelles during the period commented, the Indian naval presence “served the purpose.”

Two months later Berlouis made another attempt to unseat President René which India again helped to quash. The plot was uncovered in late August while President René was attending a meeting of the Non Aligned Movement in Harare with Rajiv Gandhi and other leaders of non-aligned states. René may have been told of the planned coup by the South African security services whose strategy was cultivating all sides in Seychelles with a view to cementing its own influence. According to another report, René was personally informed about the plot by Rajiv Gandhi who had been tipped off by the Soviets.¹⁶ Gandhi lent René his own plane, *Air India 001*, to return to Seychelles early. According to one report on 6 September René, disguised as an Indian woman wearing a sari, was met at the airport by the Indian High Commissioner and taken to the Commissioner’s residence.¹⁷ Berlouis and other plotters were then tracked to the island of Praslin. Berlouis and four other army officers were forced to resign and Berlouis left for London. The Indian ship *INS Godavari*, which was then returning to India from New York after taking part in centenary celebrations for the Statue of Liberty, was diverted to Port Victoria, although it only arrived on 24 September and departed several days after. It was reported that in October 1986, some 50

¹⁵ These may have been the HMS *Exeter* and HMS *Charybdis*, which were on tour in the Indian Ocean at the time. The authors are not aware of any evidence that the British government had any connection with the planned coup.

¹⁶ “Seychelles: The Game of Nations” *Africa Confidential*, Vol.28, No.22, 4 November 1987.

¹⁷ Donald Taylor, *Launching out into the deep: the Anglican Church in the history of the Seychelles to 2000 AD* (Victoria: Board of Church Commissioners, 2005), p.648 and additional information provided by the author.

Soviet troops were landed by the Soviet amphibious vessel the *Ivan Rogov*, to provide additional security to René.¹⁸

India's interventions cemented India's role in the Seychelles. In 1989, India established the Seychelles Defence Academy and continues to play an important role in Seychelles' security. Although India lost some of its assertiveness in the region in the wake of the Sri Lankan debacle, since the turn of the century it has been actively re-establishing its security role in the Indian Ocean. Today, India has close security relationships with many states in the southwest Indian Ocean, including Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and Mozambique, which form an important part of India's broader strategy in the Indian Ocean.¹⁹

Conclusion

Operation *Flowers Are Blooming* was the first demonstration of the Indian Navy's capability to influence political events throughout the Indian Ocean, far from the navy's traditional area of operations in South Asia. It showed that the navy could be used to project power effectively, at long distance, and with relative discretion. Naval diplomacy by the Indian Navy has been used to great effect in recent years. The success of the Seychelles operation may also have given the Rajiv Gandhi government confidence that it could execute low cost military interventions in its Indian Ocean neighbours, including its decision to intervene in Sri Lanka in July 1987 and its successful intervention in the Maldives in November 1988. That the Sri Lanka intervention was ultimately disastrous for the Indian Army, Rajiv Gandhi, and of course Sri Lanka, is a reminder of the risks involved in such actions.

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¹⁸ "Soviet base reported in Seychelles," *The Spokesman-Review*, 9 November 1987.

¹⁹ See generally, David Brewster, "An Indian sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean?" *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Spring 2010), pp. 1-20.