

India-Maldives Ties: Carving the Path to Normalcy

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Background

India was among the first countries to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965, and to establish diplomatic relations with the country by establishing its mission at Malé in 1972. India and Maldives also resolved their maritime boundary dispute amicably in 1976. Ever since, the two countries have enjoyed close and friendly relations, and have shared ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial links. India is a leading development partner of the Maldives and has established many of the leading institutions of Maldives, including the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH), the Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET), and the Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies (IMFFHTS).¹ The two countries signed a comprehensive trade agreement in 1981, and were founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Both countries have also supported each other in multilateral forums like the UN, and India has successfully helped the Maldives prevent a coup in 1988. Political, trade, and security relations between India and the Maldives were stable for a long time until trouble began brewing in the island nation with the pro-India former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed being forced to resign in February 2012.²

India-Maldives ties suffered a great deal during the Yameen Abdul Gayoom administration at the expense of increasing Chinese influence in the Maldives. Later, in 2012, an agreement signed by the Indian company GMR was abruptly cancelled by the Maldives and subsequently given to a Chinese company in 2014, marking a further drift in the relationship. More recently, India's ties with Maldives have frayed particularly under the Yameen government in Maldives, when the deterioration in India-Maldives ties accompanied simultaneous gains in Maldives-China ties. The bilateral relationship between India and Maldives further nosedived with India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officially condemning the state of emergency declared in the Maldives,

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and Malé accusing India of ‘distorting facts’.³ Using particularly strong words, India said,⁴

We are disturbed by the declaration of a State of Emergency in the Maldives following the refusal of the government to abide by the unanimous ruling of the full bench of the Supreme Court on February 1, and also by the suspension of constitutional rights of the people of Maldives.

A series of anti-India steps by the Yameen government, including refusal to renew the visas of Indian helicopter pilots based in the island nation⁵ and asking India to remove the two helicopters it had given as a goodwill gesture, indicated more tension in the bilateral relations. The two Indian helicopters operated by Indian Navy personnel were gifted by India to the Maldives in 2010 and 2011, and are based in Seenu Atoll’s Gan and Laamu Atoll’s Kahdhoo, respectively. Under the agreement between India and the Maldives, Indian personnel would handle operations until Maldivian soldiers could be properly trained. One of the helicopters was operated by the Indian Coast Guard and the other by the Indian Navy. Adding to fraying bilateral relations, the Maldives also declined India’s invitation to take part in its biennial eight-day naval exercise, Milan 2018. This marked a significant low between the two nations, which have traditionally enjoyed a history of excellent defence and security cooperation.⁶ The biggest setback came when Indians working in the Maldives for several years were denied visa renewal, and workers complained that Maldivian businesses were turning Indians away.⁷

These problems were compounded by China’s increasing footprints in the Maldives at the expense of India’s influence. Under Yameen, Maldives clearly evinced a foreign policy inclination towards China and against India. The nature of Chinese inroads in the Maldives presented twin challenge for India: external as well as internal. While China’s massive investments in the Maldives threatened to displace India’s traditional advantage, its external presence around the Maldives potentially upset the balance of power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by bringing a major power too close to the Indian peninsula.

India, China, and the Geopolitics of the Maldives

Maldives is critical to both India and China because of rising bilateral trade, tourism, and most of all because of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Until recently, Maldives has quintessentially represented India’s sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean because of historical, political, cultural, and people-to-people relations. However, in the recent years China has made

tremendous gains through its economic foothold in the country as it has invested in mega infrastructure projects in Maldives, enhanced its trade ties after having signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), promoted tourism from China to the Maldives, and made the Maldives a part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - a section of which passes through the Indian Ocean.

China's ties with the Maldives made tremendous strides under the Abdulla Yameen government. Among crucial infrastructure projects in the Maldives that involve China, the US\$ 830 million investment to upgrade the Maldives airport, a 2km (1.3 mile) bridge to link the airport island with the capital Malé, a 25-storey apartment complex and hospital in the Maldives, and the relocation of the major port have helped China become integral to the Maldivian growth story.⁸ The Maldives has an estimated US\$ 1.3 billion of debt to China which amounts to more than a quarter of its GDP. According to some claims, Chinese projects account for some 70 percent of the total Maldivian debt, and US\$ 92 million a year in payments to China, roughly 10 percent of the entire budget.⁹ Increasing debt to China has given rise to “debt for leverage” and “land grab” discourses for Maldives that is often associated with the Chinese way of investments meant to create leverage in other countries.¹⁰ Besides creating internal problems for the Maldives by way of unsustainable debt pay offs in the longer run, increasing Chinese investments have also eaten into India's operational space in the Maldives. Big projects and investments have cemented Chinese presence in the Maldives; this is the new status quo, which India will have to deal with rather than any thoughts of replacing it totally.

As China has increased its stake in the Maldives, the latter's geostrategic importance for China has risen by leaps and bounds. This has been clear in the way China has prioritised its relationship with the Maldives in the past few years. Until 2010, China did not even maintain an embassy in the Maldives. But, over the last seven years, China has not only established diplomatic presence in the Maldives but also scrambled its ships in early 2018 to deter a plausible intervention by India. Apparently, a Chinese naval combat force that entered the Indian Ocean for the first time in four years helped deter a perceived Indian intervention after Yameen imposed a state of emergency in March 2018.¹¹ The Chinese move to send warships to the Indian Ocean was a thoughtful strategy not only to deter India from extending its influence but also to assert its presence and make the Island country a factor in Chinese desire to expand its presence in the Indian Ocean region.

The recently passed law by the Maldivian Parliament, which allows foreigners to own land for the first time is likely to make land rights and ownership easier for the Chinese in the Maldives. The lease of an island close

to Malé airport to a Chinese company is being seen by India as a development that could have adverse strategic implications for India in its backyard.¹² The Maldives' embrace of the Chinese BRI has proved another hurdle for India's Maldives policy, as the island nation will prove to be an important pit-stop for China's maritime march to the western Indian Ocean, and further into the African continent. As China pushes rapidly into the Indian Ocean, the Maldives could prove to be an additional node in its 'string of pearls' strategy. Since 2014, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been consistently making its presence felt in parts of the Indian Ocean and the Maldives. This could prove vital in its advance to the heart of the Indian Ocean. It could not only cut operational space for India but erode its influence in the region.

For China, the geostrategic importance of the Maldives lies in positioning China right in the heart of the Indian Ocean, an area that China has been looking to increase its presence and influence in. The IOR has become a region with increasing stakes of big powers, especially China and India. In the past, resident external powers have looked to increase their influence by partnerships with regional countries, and a strategic renaissance of their military support facilities and their hitherto dormant presence. The additional dimension adding to the complexity of the IOR has been China's increasing desire not just to establish presence in the IOR but carry out other activities as well, like winning mining rights.

In contrast, although the Maldives has been a 'sphere of influence' for India for a number of years now, India does not see the nation as a destination of immediate interest. India continues to provide the Maldives with unconditional financial assistance, regional HA/DR assistance, and enjoys a broad-based security relationship with it. India was one of the first countries to assist the Maldives with humanitarian aid in the aftermath of the Tsunami in 2004. Also, in the wake of a drinking water crisis in Malé on 4 December 2014 (following collapse of the island's only water treatment plant), India came to the rescue by sending its heavy lift transporters, like the C-17 Globemaster III Il-76, carrying bottled water.¹³ India's basing of two helicopters in the Maldives allows for greater surveillance and an enhanced ability to respond swiftly to regional threats. India has also promised the Maldives to set up coastal radars on all 26 of its atolls for seamless maritime and aerial domain awareness. The Indian Coast Guard's regular Dornier sorties above the island and the Southern Naval Command's proximity to the Maldives provide for a deeper integration of the Maldives into the Indian maritime security grid. India and the Maldives are also in agreement for Maldivian teams to visit India's Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) for the review

and understanding of Indian efforts in securing the island chain. India and the Maldives also have a counter-terrorism understanding, and an annual joint military exercise, Ekuverin, has been held every year since 2009.¹⁴ Personnel from the Maldivian army have also been trained at the Indian Army's Counter Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School premises in Vargante in Mizoram, and the Indian Navy's Offshore Patrol Vehicle (OPV) have regularly carried out surveillance of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) waters of the Maldives with the Maldivian military providing a strong base for interoperability between the two armed forces. In May 2018, *INS Sumedha* has been deployed as part of Mission Based Deployments for the joint EEZ surveillance of the Maldives. More recently, India successfully carried out retrofits on the Maldivian Coast Guard Ship (MCGS) *Huravee* at the Naval Dockyard in Visakhapatnam.¹⁵

As for China, the Maldives' strategic location in the Indian Ocean near key shipping lanes and its importance in guaranteeing uninterrupted energy supplies is one of the most important considerations for India. The geostrategic position of the Maldives is also very important for India from the point of view of its net-security-provider aspirations in the region. As a regional major power, India attaches great importance to its relationship with the Maldives and seeks to make sincere efforts to arrest any erosion of influence in the island nation. Moreover, beyond geostrategic considerations, India has over 25,000 Indian nationals living in the Maldives, and it contributes about 6 percent of the Maldives' annual tourists. India is also a preferred destination for Maldivians for medical treatment, recreation, and business.

Path to Normalcy

The dilemma in Indian foreign policy seems to be on the path to being resolved with the recent elections in Maldives and the installation of the new government led by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, which has shown a positive attitude and political maturity in giving priority to engaging with India. In the short span that has elapsed between the declaration of President Solih's victory and his visit to India on 16 December 2018, India and Maldives have engaged in intense behind-the-scene diplomacy to undo the damage in ties done under the previous government in Maldives. This has required maiden visits from the heads of state from either side beside exchanges of very important delegations and the agreements signed by them.

With the change in government in the Maldives, its new government's willingness to better relationship with India and, above all, India's receptive attitude has positioned the India-Maldives relationship for a turn-around in

bilateral ties that were deeply harmed during the preceding Yameen government in Maldives. In an effort to restore ties with Maldives, India has carried out mature and timely political signalling. Prime Minister Modi's tweet before embarking on his Maldives visit reflected India's political willingness to engage with the island nation across various sectors. He wrote,

“I will convey to the new Maldivian Government of Mr Solih the desire of the Indian Government to work closely for realisation of their developmental priorities, especially in areas of infrastructure, health care, connectivity & human resource development”.¹⁶

Among the early steps taken by both countries to improve bilateral ties have been a number of state visits in both directions. Prime Minister Modi attended Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's swearing-in ceremony on 17 November 2018 marking the beginning of the restoration of trust in the bilateral relations.¹⁷ The Indian Prime Minister's seating position between former presidents Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Mohamed Nasheed, evinced not just a rare across-the-political-spectrum support in Maldives for working with India but a similar sentiment for the country's own fractured domestic politics which is marked by inter-party hostilities and political targeting. The Joint Statement issued when Prime Minister Modi visited the Maldives is clearly worded to renew the close bonds of cooperation and friendship between India and the Maldives. India has promised a firm commitment in assisting the Maldives to achieve sustainable social and economic development, including help to bring the Maldives out of the dire economic situation facing the country, and assisting the country in its internal affairs such as housing and infrastructure development. The most important highlight of the Joint Statement was the agreement between the two countries regarding ‘the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region.’¹⁸ As such, the promise of the Joint Statement between Prime Minister Modi and President Solih established a broad base of a new relationship between the two countries, covering aspects that will have repercussions on issues ranging from domestic to regional.

In a step that complimented Prime Minister Modi's visit, the Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid visited India within days of President Solih's taking office, and announced a ‘new era’ of close diplomatic relations. The Foreign Minister of Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, paid an official visit to India from 24–27 November 2018, along with a large delegation which comprised Ibrahim Ameer, the Minister of Finance; Fayyaz Ismail, the Minister of Economic Development; Ahmed Khaleel, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs;

and Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed, Foreign Secretary. Besides signalling that there was domestic support across the political spectrum in the current government in Maldives for bettering relations with India, the visit was important for India's own reiteration that it attaches the 'highest importance to its relationship with the Maldives which is marked by trust, transparency, mutual understanding, and sensitivity', and also the fact that, in line with the Government of India's Neighbourhood First policy, 'India stands ready to fully support the Government of Maldives in its socio-economic development'.¹⁹

The Maldivian delegation complemented India's readiness to engage positively with Maldives by outlining the current Maldivian Government's 'India First' policy,²⁰ and its willingness to engage with India 'on all issues'. The promise that 'the Maldives will be sensitive towards India's security and strategic concerns' carries the strongest conviction that bilateral ties between the two sides will be better than under the last government in Maldives. Most importantly, Foreign Minister Shahid's visit to India also paved the way for the maiden three-day visit of President Solih as the head of the state to India,²¹ and the agreement to hold the meeting of the bilateral Consular Dialogue at the earliest. All in all, a solid broad-basing of bilateral ties was provided in the discussions during Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid's visit to India where discussions regarding security and defence matters, including ongoing projects and new areas of cooperation, took place. In this regard, the two countries agreed to hold the next meeting of the Defence Cooperation Dialogue between both countries in the first half of December 2018. India and Maldives also discussed ways and means to expand and diversify bilateral economic and commercial relations, encouraging the role of the private sector. Also, a likely visit by the Indian External Affairs minister to the Maldives and a meeting of the Joint Commission at the level of Foreign Ministers were agreed upon.²²

Importantly for India-Maldives ties, engagement with the Maldives has been at the highest levels of the government on both sides. The Indian President Ramnath Kovind, Prime Minister Modi, and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj have all held discussions with Maldivian leaders fruitfully. In a special gesture, India laid down a red carpet welcome for the President Solih on 17 December 2018. More importantly, President Solih was housed in the Rashtrapati Bhawan — a gesture reserved only for very special guests.²³ During President Solih's visit to India, a US\$ 1.4 billion package for the Maldives to meet its immediate budgetary as well as some medium-term requirements was granted by India.²⁴ This is on top of an immediate loan of US\$ 25 million

to the Maldives offered during the earlier visit by its new Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid to India. This assistance from India came on the back of the Maldivian request for immediate budgetary assistance, needed because the country has been reeling under huge debts.

Furthermore, the two countries have signed four agreements: the Facilitation of Visa Agreement; the Memorandum of Understanding on Cultural Cooperation; the Memorandum of Understanding for Establishing Mutual Cooperation to Improve the Ecosystem for Agri-business; and a Joint Declaration of Intent on Cooperation in the Field of Information & Communications Technology and Electronics. These steps seem to have stabilised India's relations with the Maldives that was under free fall under the Yameen government. More critically, the India-Maldives joint announcement during President Solih's visit to India that the two countries will 'deepen ... cooperation' 'to maintain peace and security in the Indian Ocean region' repositions India to make gains after some serious strategic deficit due to lopsided Chinese gains in the country.

Conclusion

As unstable as the present governing coalition in the Maldives might appear, it presents India with an opportunity to set the clock back by repairing bilateral ties —especially as it finds vocal support from its current leaders. Among other substantial bilateral gains, India has convinced the Maldives to retain the helicopters, along with the 48-member crew of the Indian Navy. However, the two countries' latest agreement 'on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region' promises to bring a balance in bilateral ties that has been upset by imbalanced Chinese forays.

The process of the restoration of bilateral ties between India and the Maldives has begun. It would be short sighted to perceive the importance of a politically stable Maldives in the context of just bilateral relations. In fact, much beyond such parochial considerations, the return of true democracy in the Maldives augurs well for the stability of the IOR as well as for the sustainability of the democratic tradition in the larger South Asian region. A stable Maldives that doesn't 'play India against China'²⁵ is likely to deter conflict, and add to a cohesive balance of power in South Asia while significantly enhancing its own growth potential. To this end, India has welcomed the Maldives into the Indian Ocean Rim Association as its newest member. Strong signs of the strengthening of democratic objectives are already

emerging in the Maldives with its decision to rejoin²⁶ the Commonwealth after pulling out of the organization in 2016 which has been appreciated and supported by India.

In the past few years, India-Maldives ties have, quintessentially, come to symbolize the dilemma that India faces in its maritime neighbourhood: the difficulty of balancing its intrusive-accommodative dilemmas vis-à-vis its relationship with smaller regional powers. This dilemma has been further heightened with increasing Chinese presence in the IOR, and its motivated economic assistance to smaller countries of the region. The regional perception that India, as the biggest and most powerful regional country, has conducted itself in a top-down fashion for a long time has harmed its image. With resource mobilization in these smaller regional countries (primarily through Chinese assistance), their improving economy, a growing sense of the need to conduct an independent foreign policy, and respect for sovereignty among these countries, a turnaround in India's foreign policy towards these countries seems to have begun. Maldives locates itself in this ongoing diplomatic transition where a regional heavyweight, India, is accommodating itself to the changing geopolitical circumstances around it, and is trying to help smaller neighbours resolve their problems as much as practicable. All aspiring great powers have factored accommodation in their relations with smaller nations. India-Maldives ties appear to be one such transitory phase in Indian diplomacy.

Notes :

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