

India-Maldives Relations: Is the Rough Patch Over?

Anand Kumar*

The ‘neighbourhood’ has always been an important aspect of India’s foreign policy. It was recently emphasised by the present government through its ‘neighbourhood first’ policy. Within this construct, India-Maldives relations have come into focus due to many reasons - the most glaring of which is the fact that while PM Modi has visited all neighbouring countries, many within the first year of assuming office, he is yet to visit Malé.

After independence from Britain in 1965, Maldives’ relationship with India has generally been stable. However, this situation has changed somewhat in the last few years, especially after the removal of Mohamed Nasheed from power in February 2012 which led to a complex power play in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India has been trying hard to regain stability in its bilateral relations with the Maldives; but the rough patch seems far from being completely over.

Maldives is an archipelagic nation, situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It is located 300 miles from the southern coast of India and 450 miles southwest of Sri Lanka. It consists of 1,192 islands, of which nearly 200 are inhabited. With a population of about 350,000, it is one of the most dispersed countries in the world. It is a low lying nation, and most parts of the country are barely a meter above sea level. This makes Maldives very vulnerable to the phenomenon of climate change and sea level rise.

The strategic location of the Maldives straddling important SLOCs and its proximity to Diego Garcia - where the US Central Command base is positioned - has aroused the interest of important world powers. In the past, countries like Iran, Libya, and the former Soviet Union have shown interest in leasing the erstwhile British base in Gan, one of the Islands of the archipelago - perhaps for military purposes. In recent times, countries like China and the USA have been interested in getting a foothold in the Maldives. External powers have occasionally aided and abetted political conspiracies, bringing political instability to the country. Being a 100 percent Sunni Muslim

***The Author** is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

country, Maldives has also been close to the Islamic world, especially the Gulf countries.

Some of the main drivers of Maldivian foreign policy have remained constant over the years. They are its small size, strategic location, and religious identity. The small size of Maldives also makes it vulnerable to coups. It has been suggested that the most realistic and effective arrangement to keep small states secure is bilateral agreements with major powers, which have overwhelming military capabilities.¹ This makes it imperative for the country to remain friendly with major powers like India, the US, and China, as well as to join multilateral forums like the SAARC.

To properly understand India-Maldives relations, it is important to highlight Indian interests in that country. Firstly, India is interested in political stability in its neighbourhood, and Maldives is no exception. Secondly, India would like to prevent Maldives from falling under the influence of any force (state or non-state) that are inimical to its security interests. These forces can also change the security environment in the IOR. Thirdly, a large number of Indians work in Maldives, and India is interested in their safety and security. Finally, India would like the investments of its companies in the Maldives to remain secure.²

The Evolution of Maldivian Foreign Policy: Early Years after Independence

Maldives became a member of the United Nations (UN) immediately after its independence in 1965. With this step, it wanted to end the isolation of the country, and hoped that its membership would bring much needed security to the archipelago nation. It also hoped to get technical assistance from the international community, urgently required for the development of the country. Maldives also joined various UN agencies and other multilateral organisations hoping to get development assistance.

In South Asia, Maldives developed close relationships with Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. Its relationship with Bangladesh has also deepened in recent times. From Sri Lanka, Maldivians bought their staple food (rice) and sold fish in return. They were also getting their other ancillary foodstuff from Sri Lanka. This exchange also allowed Ceylonese traders to indirectly influence Maldivian politics. Maumoon Gayoom considered Sri Lanka as Maldives' gateway to the world. Initially, Maldives had its only permanent mission in Colombo, which was closed in 1976, to be reopened later in 1979. In 1981, Sri Lanka opened a permanent mission in Malé.

However, India was the first country to open a resident mission in Malé in 1976. India-Maldives relationship began deepening in the 1960s when a number of Maldivian students came to study in India under the Colombo Plan. A State Bank of India branch was opened in Malé in 1974, and an airline service commenced in 1975. In 1978, the International Airport Authority of India won an international tender to expand the runway of Hulhule airport, and modernise it. It completed its work in 1981. Both countries also signed an agreement to abolish the need for visas for travel between the two countries. Besides, India has also been providing technical assistance in various fields as desired by the Maldivian government. In July 1982, there was a small dispute between India and the Maldives over the Minicoy Island. However, subsequently Maldives clarified that it was not laying any political claim over Minicoy, and was talking only of cultural similarity. In 1976, a Maritime Agreement was signed between the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India to demarcate their respective jurisdiction in the territorial waters on the Median Line principle.

Maldives also has significant relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan has been maintaining a resident mission in Malé. In the 1940s, a small number of Pakistanis were employed by the British on Gan base. Pakistan has also provided technical assistance to Malé. Former president Maumoon Gayoom had once sought the services of a Pakistani constitutional expert for drafting a new constitution.

Gayoom and his Apparent Friendship with India

Maldivian foreign policy during the President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom era was indifferent to India, although Gayoom successfully managed to create the impression that he was friendly to India. India had saved his regime from a coup. However, he still did not give any special privileges to India.³ Most Indian troops were withdrawn once order was restored, and only a small number of soldiers remained on the island to protect Gayoom for a year. In the later part of his regime, Gayoom tried to play China against India, as the democratic movement started to gather momentum. Gayoom probably feared that democratic India may not support him as strongly in the face of a democratic upsurge in his own country. This insecurity prompted him to look for new international partners. In this quest, he started relying increasingly on China - an emerging global power with important strategic interests in the Indian Ocean.⁴

Gayoom visited China for the first time in 1984. He went to China again in September 2006, which further deepened relationship between Maldives

and China.⁵ China has tried to make inroads in countries, which is of strategic importance to them, by engaging in infrastructural projects. Maldives is no exception. China has built the Maldivian Foreign Ministry building as well as a museum, which houses the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. The Chinese have also built several housing projects in Malé, apart from building roads as well as the drainage system in the city.⁶ The Chinese have built a reputation for themselves for completing projects on time. China also provided assistance to the Maldives following the disastrous tsunami of 2004.⁷

Nasheed's Tenure: A Mixed Bag for a Bilateral Relationship

Bilateral relations between India and Maldives saw some improvement with the onset of multi-party democracy, and the coming to power of President Mohamed Nasheed. During his visit to India, (before the October 2008 multiparty presidential elections) Nasheed openly accused Gayoom of cosying up to China.⁸ He promised that if his party came to power, he would correct it. This could have been a ploy to seek Indian support, and also to put pressure on Gayoom so that he would not postpone elections, as he had done in the past.

During Nasheed's presidency, tourism industry -the mainstay of the Maldivian economy - was going through some difficulty because of global economic recession. The Chinese sensed an opportunity there, and signed some agreements to develop tourism.⁹ China now accounts for the largest number of tourists in the Maldives, surpassing the UK and other European nations.

Chinese also opened their embassy in Malé on November 8, 2011, during Nasheed's time. However, what surprised everyone was the plan of the Nasheed government to sign two agreements with China for the supply of military hardware and for military training. These plans were later given up once they became known, and Maldives promised not to do anything that compromised the security environment of the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ In October 2011, Nasheed tried to allay Indian fears by stating - on the side lines of the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth (Australia) - that the Maldives "will always be India's friend", and also added that he trusted "democracy far more than any other system".

The government of Nasheed claimed to follow an 'India first' foreign policy. Nasheed recently defined this policy as not having defence exercises with other countries, not to conduct domestic policy in a way that creates fear in India, not to give a base to the Chinese, or indeed anyone to create

strategic infrastructure, like deep-water ports and airports.¹¹

This meant that the government under him prioritised Indian interests. It also meant that Maldives would not do anything which could jeopardise Indian security interests. He had allowed the installation of radars on 26 atolls. Indian and Maldivian navies were engaged in joint exercises. The Indian navy also provided training to the MNDF. In fact, after emerging as the top contender in the first round of the 2013 presidential elections, Nasheed told a Chinese journalist that India was the most important country for him, though he was equally close to the Western powers.

Downward Slide under Waheed

The Maldivian approach to India shifted yet again under the stop-gap regime of President Waheed. The Waheed government started on a clearly anti-India note by, for example, terminating the GMR contract *ab-initio*. The decision was not just a result of domestic politics; it seems to have been made under external influence, especially of China. However, Waheed denied that China had nudged him into the act.¹² He and his Minister of Defence and National Security, Colonel (Retired) Mohamed Nazim, visited China. During his visit, Waheed appreciated Beijing's approach to smaller countries, and its policy of non-interference in their internal affairs "unlike other influential countries".¹³ Both countries signed three agreements, which gave Maldives US\$ 500 million in assistance.¹⁴ A few months earlier, Waheed had also stated that the Maldives now had more access to Chinese funds for developmental projects in the country. This was a clear hint of the growing closeness between the two countries.¹⁵ When Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim visited China in December 2012, he signed a military aid agreement with the Chinese National Defence Minister, General Liang Guanglie. Nazim also assured Guanglie that the Maldives was "willing to cement relations between the two countries and their militaries".¹⁶

Under Waheed, India's influence over the Maldives plummeted. India wanted a smooth political transition in the Maldives through free and fair elections. Moreover, the then Indian Foreign Secretary, Sujatha Singh, had visited the Maldives to persuade Maldivian authorities to hold the run-off presidential election. Despite India's efforts, the opponents of Nasheed managed to get the elections scuttled.

At the same time, there was a significant increase in China's influence, which already had a firm presence in Sri Lanka. As chair of the SAARC, the Maldives during Waheed's regime was also working to bring China into the

regional organisation, it was being hinted.

Waheed adopted an unusual confrontational attitude towards India. He resented India's role as facilitator in the Maldivian presidential elections, and stated that foreign powers should stay out of Maldives. The Maldivian Foreign Ministry even called the Indian Ambassador, Rajeev Sahare, to raise the issue of his meeting with the Maldivian Election Commission. These actions of the Waheed government raised the important question about the source of his strength.

The Chinese strongly supported Waheed during the presidential elections in 2013. India wanted China to join the international community in pressuring Waheed's government to hold the elections in a free, fair, in an inclusive manner, and as scheduled. However, China refused to put any pressure on Waheed, but stated that it too wanted stability in the region.¹⁷

Foreign Relations under Abdulla Yameen

The broad trends witnessed during the Waheed regime continued in the initial period of Abdulla Yameen's regime. In the campaign for the 2013 presidential polls, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Yameen's half-brother and former autocrat, had argued that Malé should distance itself from the West and India, and move closer to China. Similarly, during his election campaign, Waheed had clearly stated that he planned to increase ties with China and improve trade and tourism.¹⁸ Only Nasheed (after the first round of elections) had stated that India was the single most important country for Maldives.¹⁹ However, after the elections, Yameen chose to lower the political rhetoric in recognition of strategic realities, and visited India as his first foreign visit destination after taking office.

The foreign policy of Abdulla Yameen is driven by religion, the need to tackle the financial crisis of the Maldives, and to legitimise his regime as he has come to power after a controversial election. With this objective, he has visited a number of countries, which include India, Japan, China, and Saudi Arabia. However, the choices made by him to deal with the financial crisis are rather interesting.

It is interesting to note that after India, another major country to be visited by Yameen was Japan. His April 2014 state visit was the first official visit of a Maldivian President to Japan, and was seen as Yameen's economic offensive.²⁰ Japan emerged as the biggest donor for the Maldives after their diplomatic relationship was established nearly 40 years ago, in 1967. During

the 2014 visit, Yameen held meetings with prominent businessmen, economists, and industrialists, and discussed means of obtaining funds for various development projects in the Maldives.²¹ Both countries showed interest in enhancing cooperation in the area of maritime security. Japan wanted the Maldives to ensure the safety of sea lanes.²²

As far as China is concerned, the bilateral relationship has continued to deepen under Yameen. Chinese companies have showed interest in major Maldivian infrastructural and communication projects that are on offer - for example, constructing a bridge between Malé and the island of Hulhule by using their own funds, and maintaining it for a prolonged period.²³

The visit of Chinese President, Xi Jinping, to Maldives in September 2014 gave a big boost to China-Maldives bilateral relations. This was the first visit of any Chinese President to the Maldives since the former British protectorate gained independence in 1965. The most important objective of the Xi Jinping's visit to the Maldives was to get Maldivian support for his modern maritime "Silk Road". Maldives agreed to participate actively in the initiative of creating a shipping route from China to Europe via West Africa.²⁴ Besides this, both sides signed nine agreements relating to the expansion of Maldives' main international airport, a power station project, road construction, and a bridge to connect the capital island of Malé with nearby Hulhule. Keeping in view the critical importance of tourism in the Maldivian economy, President Xi Jinping reassured the country that China would continue to encourage its citizens to travel to the Maldives, and Chinese enterprises to invest in Maldives' tourism industry. It was believed that both sides did not take up sensitive security issues, as it would have raised concerns in India.

Moreover, Maldives obliged China by endorsing its Maritime Silk Route project in December 2014. It also decided to back the Chinese-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).²⁵ Malé has already held two rounds of talks on a free trade pact with China, and hopes to sign the agreement either by end of 2016, or in the beginning of 2017.²⁶

The most controversial decision of Yameen has been to pass a law that allows foreigners to own land in the Maldives. The constitutional amendment bill passed by the Maldivian parliament allows foreign parties who invest at least US\$1 billion to lease land on the project site on a freehold basis. At least 70 per cent of the land must be reclaimed.²⁷ The Yameen government has also introduced amendments to the Tourism Act. The Tourism Act originally stated that islands and lands might be leased for development of resorts only to the best bid under the policy determined by the tourism ministry. However, now

the government amendment authorises the state to lease islands, lagoons, and land plots for tourism projects without putting them up for bid. It was widely believed that these moves would help China establish a foothold in the IOR.

Further, Yameen is also trying to take Maldives closer to Saudi Arabia. Maldives is a Sunni Muslim country like Saudi Arabia, and considers Saudi Arabia as the fountainhead of Islam. During his election campaign, Yameen had portrayed Nasheed as the enemy of Islamic unity in the country. His election manifesto talked of closer relationship with Arab Muslim countries, among other things. Even Gayoom - who had opposed radical versions of Islam and Saudi influence in religion during his rule - changed his policy after getting defeated by Nasheed in order to expand his coalition by roping in conservative Islamic parties and organisations.²⁸

The common religious ideology is not the only attraction for the Maldivians to look towards the Saudis. The acute financial crisis in the Maldives has also made the country look towards them for help. Saudis have already promised the Maldives a five-year soft loan facility of US\$ 300 mn, which was pledged in July 2013 when the country's previous president, Waheed, visited Riyadh.²⁹

Presently, Maldives' relations with Saudi Arabia are at an all-time high as the Maldives looks to secure funding for several mega development projects of the government. The Saudis have also agreed to provide oil to the Maldives at a discounted price. In the latter half of 2015, Saudi Arabia had also announced its decision to build new schools in the Maldives, and requested the submission of relevant plans at the earliest. To reciprocate the gesture of Saudis, the Maldives has now signed up to be a part of an Islamic military alliance spearheaded by the Islamic kingdom.³⁰

However, the biggest gain in cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Maldives is in the area of Islamic affairs. The Saudi Prince has pledged to build 10 "world-class" mosques in the archipelago.

Funding from Saudi Arabia is also convenient as the country does not raise uncomfortable questions involving human rights or rising Islamic conservatism. Moreover, the funding received from them is useful in sustaining a large civil service. The Western powers, which were quite active during Nasheed's time, now appear apprehensive about growing Saudi influence in the Maldives.³¹

As far as India-Maldives bilateral relations are concerned, they faced pressure in the beginning of the Yameen regime. When Yameen came to power, he made clear that though he wanted to improve his country's relationship with India, it did not mean that the GMR contract would be renewed. On the

other hand, he asked his government to make arrangements for the payment to GMR, as Maldives had lost the arbitration case in Singapore. India-Maldives bilateral relationship seems to be improving somewhat after the visit of the Indian Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj, in October 2015 when India tried to mend fences. The visit has arrested the downward slide in the bilateral relations; however, the bonhomie of the Nasheed days has not yet returned. The repeated misreading of the situation in the Maldives since late 2011 has caused problems in India-Maldives bilateral relations. Reversing this is going to take concerted effort and time.

India-Maldives Defence Relationship

The defence cooperation between India and Maldives ranges from training and joint combat exercises to help in maritime surveillance as well as the supply of military equipment to the country. The Coast Guards of the two countries have been conducting joint training exercises codenamed “DOSTI” since 1991, in addition to other joint defence interactions.³² Subsequently, these exercises were expanded to include Sri Lanka in 2012, thus making it a trilateral exercise. The aim of these exercises is to further fortify the friendship, enhance mutual operational capability, exercise interoperability, and build cooperation between the Coast Guards of Maldives, India and Sri Lanka. The “DOSTI-XII” joint exercises were conducted by the Indian Coast Guard with the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Sri Lankan Coast Guard at Malé, Maldives from 28-31 October 2014. The focus of these exercises was on Maritime Search and Rescue (M-SAR), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Marine Pollution Response (POLRES), and Anti-piracy operations. For the first time, the exercises were also viewed by representatives from the maritime forces of Seychelles and Mauritius.

India and Maldives also have a joint Military Training Exercise, codenamed “EKUVERIN”. This bilateral annual exercise commenced in 2009 at Belgaum, India. It is held annually, alternately in India and Maldives, with the aim of enhancing military cooperation and interoperability between the defence forces of the two countries. The sixth joint Military Training Exercise between the Indian Army and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) was held at Thiruvananthapuram in 2015. In this joint exercise, forty five marines from the Maldivian National Defence Force and the same number of Indian infantry troops participated.³³

When the then Indian Defence Minister, A. K. Anthony, visited the Maldives in August 2009, he signed a defence cooperation agreement with the Maldives.

As per the agreement, the Indian Navy and the MNDF would carry out joint surveillance and patrolling activities in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi agreed to provide a Dhruv helicopter, and help establish a 25-bed military hospital in the island chain.³⁴ It was also reported that India would establish a network of ground radars in all its 26 atolls in the country, and link them up with the Indian coastal command.³⁵ A section in the Maldives tried to oppose the agreement, stating that “Maldivian sovereignty was under threat and that the country was becoming an Indian protectorate”.³⁶ Maldives, however, continues to accord great importance to security cooperation with India, as its vital tourism industry continues to depend on security in the IOR. India helps the Maldives by regularly patrolling its territorial waters, with both warships and reconnaissance aircraft.

However, things changed in the area of defence cooperation with the exit of Nasheed. Waheed had signed a defence cooperation agreement with China in December 2012. Yameen too, initially, appeared closer to China. Moreover, the internal power struggle in the Maldives caused a chill in its relationship with India. This relationship has now started improving once again, with some quiet diplomacy. When India’s External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, visited the Maldives in October 2015, she emphasised the Government of India policy of ‘Neighbours First’ in her meeting with President Yameen. Interestingly, President Yameen also reiterated Maldives’ policy of ‘India First’.

Sushma Swaraj was in the Maldives in October 2015 to co-chair the 5th Meeting of the India-Maldives Joint Commission. The Joint Commission was set up under the 1986 Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, and first met in Malé in 1990. The Framework Agreement for Cooperation, signed in November 2011, mandated the Joint Commission to broaden its cross sectoral emphasis to include defence and security related issues.

Thus, for the first time, the defence and security relationship was discussed in the Joint Commission meeting. The Maldivian side acknowledged the usefulness of the Advanced Light Helicopter given by India in the development of aviation capacities in the Maldives. The Ministers were of the view that the bilateral partnership was important also for maintaining security in the IOR. It was felt that increased cooperation would help in meeting the common threat of radicalism and terrorism as well as in combating the growing menace of drug trafficking and the financing of terrorism in the region.

India and the Maldives have also initiated active counter-terrorism mechanisms to thwart any future seaborne terror attacks on Indian soil, similar to the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai. This joint counter-terrorism mechanism will

include active intelligence sharing on a continual basis, aimed at specifically nullifying any sort of misadventure that may be attempted by terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

A landmark development took place in the India-Maldives defence relationship when President Yameen visited India in April 2016. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the defence action plan “envisages an institutional mechanism at the level of the defence secretaries to further bilateral defence cooperation.” The main components of the plan include the development of ports, continuous training, capacity building, supply of equipment, and maritime surveillance. The security cooperation also includes “Information exchange between security agencies as well as the training and capacity building of Maldives Police and security forces.”³⁷ Both sides also stated that they were aware of the growing dangers of cross-border terrorism and radicalisation in South Asia. President Yameen also agreed that he would be sensitive to India’s strategic and security needs.

India and the Maldivian Conundrum

Maldives is not only located in India’s neighbourhood but is also strategically located in the Indian Ocean. Thus, any important political, economic, or security related development in that country is likely to have implications for India, and it will be difficult for India to stand aloof in the face of such developments. Keeping such possibilities in view, it is necessary for India to have a deeper and comprehensive engagement with its neighbour. Moreover, an unsure and wavering India would prompt external powers to step in, which would complicate the situation further.

While promotion and preservation of democracy in Maldives should be an important objective, any effort in this regard should also ensure the friendliness of the incumbent regime towards India as well as stability in that country. Apparently, to protect a democratic space for the opposition in Maldives, Western countries, the UN, and the Commonwealth have expressed concern about legal processes being followed against Nasheed. India is also part of some of these international responses. While it is important to protect space for the opposition in the Maldivian polity, it is difficult to preserve fledgling democracy in the Maldives by expressing a political preference for Nasheed’s leadership. In fact, the waning support base and perception of regional powers backing the opposition could drive the Yameen government in to an autocratic overdrive, or in the lap of inimical external powers.

India should also be careful in being part of the international diplomatic response. Any adverse diplomatic response has the potential to foster a long-term strategic divergence between New Delhi and Malé. This fissure in the bilateral relationship could be used by many opportunistic external powers.

In any case, the use of diplomacy should be the preferred choice before resorting to any other method. India seems to be using this option by sending senior diplomats on several occasions. Even Foreign Secretary Jaishankar has visited Maldives – probably more than any other country. However, the cancellation of the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi could not achieve the desired impact. If anything, it only made the Maldivians more hostile at that time. Possibly, India was left with little choice, as a visit to the archipelago nation at that time would have been seen as endorsement of Yameen’s policies.

Maldives has seen in India a strategic partner that is capable of guaranteeing its security. This belief was further strengthened after the 1988 coup against Gayoom. India and the Maldives, along with Sri Lanka, have already signed “tri-lateral cooperation on maritime agreement” for dialogue at the NSA level.³⁸ This mechanism should be used to address the security concerns of all the three countries. It can also be expanded at a later stage to include other countries of the IOR.

Finally, Indian diplomacy has to come out of its fire-fighting mode. After the removal of Nasheed from power, India has merely reacted to situations. On the other hand, the USA, the UK, the EU, and even China have tried to influence events since then. Initially, a series of meetings happened between Indian and Maldivian officials after Nasheed was deposed; but nothing concrete emerged. Fortunately, things appear to be changing now. This is particularly so after President Yameen’s visit to India in April 2016, when India signed six agreements with his government, one of which was in the defence domain.

Still, it cannot be said that the India-Maldives relationship is out of the woods. The legislation passed by the Yameen government to sell islands, and allot land without bidding has not been repealed. Though things have improved between India and the Maldives, still, India cannot be complacent.

Notes :

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