



Maldives President Visits India: Bilateral Partnership for Regional Security

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On 11 April 2016, the President of Maldives, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom said in New Delhi, “The reason I visited India today is to express my appreciation for the very steadfast leadership India has shown in protecting Maldives in the CMAG (Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group) deliberations. We look at India for continued support in preventing any unfair, any punitive action by the CMAG on the Maldives.....”ⁱ Aside this stated reason, the President’s visit provided an opportunity to delve on the entire range of issues at the highest level and place bilateral relations back on track; even though complex challenges persist. Six agreements were concluded during the visit, including the Action Plan for Defence Cooperation.ⁱⁱ

The President of Maldives added, “Maldives and India share common perspectives on peace and stability in the South Asia and Indian Ocean Region. That is why the Maldives pursues an ‘India first’ foreign policy.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Indian Prime Minister Modi said that it was in India’s strategic interest to have a stable and secure Maldives; and that the contours of India-Maldives relations are defined by their shared strategic, security, economic and developmental goals. He added, “We are conscious of the security needs of Maldives and President Yameen agrees that Maldives will be sensitive to our strategic and security interests. India understands its role as a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean and is ready to protect its strategic interests in this region.”^{iv} Both leaders brought out the centrality of the Indian Ocean in shaping their relations.^v

India is geo-strategically located in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through which, much of the world's shipping transits. To the south of India's Lakshadweep Island group, less than 400 km from India's coast, lies Maldives having 1,200 islands.^{vi} Its total land area is 300 sq km; and its EEZ is 9,233,22 sq km.^{vii} Any political or economic instability within Maldives can impact on the security of the trading routes of the Indian Ocean and the Indian mainland too. ^{viii}

In the above context, this issue brief examines the visit of the President of Maldives with reference to his stated 'India First' policy; Modi's statement that India is the 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean Region; and lastly, the strategic engagement between these maritime neighbours.

India First Policy of Maldives

Many leaders from Maldives have time and again stated that their country pursues India First policy^{ix}. But, it has rarely been elaborated. Further, given the expanding political and economic relations between Maldives and China, the phrase-'India First' is confusing.

Maldives foreign minister said, "The Maldives' relations with India has sufficient depth and will not be shaken by the presence of Chinese investors in the Maldives"^x. On another occasion, reacting to the comment that Maldives was adopting a pro-China tilt, the President's office stated that while Maldives was forging ahead with a highly ambitious economic agenda, that includes developmental and infrastructure undertakings where China is a partner; Maldives would work closely with India in safeguarding the regional safety and security.^{xi}

Maldives relations with China strengthened in September 2014, when President Xi became the first President of China to visit Maldives. The two countries established "Future Oriented All Round Friendly and Cooperative Partnership"^{xii}; and the Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation (JCTEC).^{xiii} In December 2014,

Maldives officially became part of China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) Initiative.^{xiv} Maldives has planned for transformational infrastructural development projects, and China is funding some of these. These include upgrading the Maldives international airport^{xv}; constructing the bridge between the airport island of Huhumalé and the capital Male. Called the 'Maldives China Friendship Bridge', the project commenced in December 2015.^{xvi} China is also undertaking large social housing and road projects, including the longest road in the country. The two countries also want to set up a China-Maldives bilateral free trade area. Important landmarks in Male including the National Museum and the Headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were constructed with donor assistance of Chinese Government. Maldives also became a founding partner in the Chinese led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). From August 2010 to April 2016, the total number of Chinese tourists to have arrived in Maldives is 104,106 tourists which accounts for 33 per cent of all incoming tourists.

China argues that its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative is an open and inclusive initiative of economic cooperation; wherein focus will be on prioritising connectivity development efforts in Asia^{xvii}. Many analysts argue that China's proposal of MSR to the Indian Ocean littorals is part of its grand strategy to counter the United States rebalance strategy as well as further its own influence in the region^{xviii}; that the larger aim of China investing in mega infrastructure projects in Maldives is that Beijing can claim a greater security role by putting forward the reason that it needs to protect the economic investments it has made. ^{xix}

In a recent interview, however, former President Nasheed defined it as, ".....not to have defence exercises with other countries, not to conduct our domestic policy in a way that creates fear in India, not to give base to the Chinese, or indeed anyone to create strategic infrastructure like deep-water ports and airports."^{xx}

An analysis of statements emanating from Maldives, leads to the conclusion that by India First policy, Maldives is referring to cooperation specifically in defence and security matters where it has concluded agreements primarily with India. However, countries which make huge economic investments in critical infrastructure in Maldives

have the potential to influence, decisions on security matters too. In this context, concerns arise with regard to China. ^{xxi}

India as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean

Most of the world's shipping transits through the Indian Ocean and this includes crude oil requirements of the world's major economies including China, Japan, India and other Southeast Asian countries. Thus, dependence on seas and International Shipping Lanes (ISL) is increasing, and their safety has become central to global economy. Given the nature of maritime domain, concerns arise from an increase in non-traditional security threats including piracy and armed robbery at sea; arms/drug/human trafficking and smuggling at sea; and maritime terrorism. In such a scenario, ensuring security of ISLs has become important for all countries including India. Natural disasters and regional instabilities in littoral countries also impact maritime trade and result in countries carrying out HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) operations and NEO (Non-combatant Evacuation Operations).

Thus, when security is available, a favourable and positive maritime environment will emerge where threats are low; and even if they arise they can be prevented and contained. By helping shape a favourable and positive maritime environment, India becomes a 'net maritime security provider'^{xxii}. The question which next arises is how can India maintain security and help shape such an environment? This among other measures is possible through cooperating with the littoral countries through maritime engagements, capacity building, capability enhancement and conducting maritime security operations. Apart from India's own maritime capabilities, implicit in all this is a coordinated approach either bilaterally, trilaterally or through other regional forums.^{xxiii} The comprehensive maritime policy of Modi for Indian Ocean known by the acronym SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), incorporates all these elements.

Some of the regional cooperative approaches in the Indian Ocean Region include, operational interactions termed as 'MILAN', the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium

(IONS) where the navies meet; and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) where maritime security cooperation is a priority area.

This essay argues that cordial bilateral relations with maritime neighbours are critical to India fulfilling its role as an effective 'net maritime security provider'. It is in this context that India's relation with Maldives is significant. ^{xxiv}

India-Maldives Strategic Relations

Three developments have deepened strategic content in India-Maldives relations. These are: first, the 1988 coup attempt in Maldives, which was foiled with Indian assistance under 'Operation Cactus' after a request came from Maldives; second, globalisation and its resultant dependence on maritime trade since the decade of the nineties and therefore the need for ensuring safe seas; and third, the November 2008, '26/11' terror attack on Mumbai, India wherein the terrorists came through the sea.

It is also noticed that there is no consensus in Maldives regarding strategic cooperation with India. The depth of security and strategic cooperation has varied with the change in leadership at the helm in Maldives. With democracy introduced in 2008, yet to find firm footing in the island country, India gets entangled in the polarised political debate.^{xxv} This strains India relations with certain sections of the Maldivian political class and impacts on the nature of strategic cooperation between the maritime neighbours. ^{xxvi}

Since 1991, the Indian Coast Guard and the MNDF (Maldives National Defence Forces) have been conducting joint exercises named DOSTI. Sri Lanka joined the 11th edition of the exercise in 2012, making it a trilateral exercise.^{xxvii} Since 2009, the Indian Army and the MNDF have been conducting bilateral exercises named Ekuverin.^{xxviii} Also, a large number of defence and service personnel from Maldives are trained in various defence establishments in India every year

During the tenure of President Nasheed, the first democratically elected President of Maldives, strategic cooperation intensified. His first visit to India after assuming office in December 2008 was merely a month after the '26/11' terrorist attack on Mumbai. The Joint Statement of December 2008, spelt out, "The two sides expressed their commitment to enhance their defence and security relations based on shared maritime threats and other security concerns".^{xxix}

In August 2009, Indian Defence Minister A K Antony visited Maldives.^{xxx} Both countries agreed to enhance cooperation in the area of coastal security and maritime surveillance. India agreed to set up 26 radars across the Maldives 26 Atolls which would be linked to the Indian coastal command to effectively monitor the vast uninhabited Maldivian islands against possible terrorist intrusion and activities of piracy in its EEZ.^{xxxi} In 2010, India donated two utility helicopters to Maldives.^{xxxii}

In October 2011, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives launched the Trilateral Cooperation in Maritime Security at the first NSA-level Trilateral Meeting on Maritime Security Cooperation in Maldives. Subsequent meeting were held in Sri Lanka and India^{xxxiii}. In November 2011, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a bilateral visit to Maldives and concluded the Framework Agreement on Cooperation for Development. Article 5 of this agreements states :

"(India and Maldives) To cooperate on issues of concern to each other arising from their unique geographical location which include piracy, maritime security, terrorism, organised crimes, drugs and human trafficking, the Parties shall strengthen their cooperation to enhance security in the Indian Ocean Region through coordinated patrolling and aerial surveillance, exchange of information, development of effective legal framework and other measures mutually agreed upon. They will intensify their cooperation in the area of training and capacity building of police and security forces." ^{xxxiv}

The coming to power of Prime Minister Modi in May 2014 was preceded by a phase of instability in Maldives domestic politics, which had an impact on the bilateral

relations too. In 2012, Maldives cancelled the agreement entered with the Indian infrastructure company GMR for modernisation of the international airport. The much anticipated Modi visit to Maldives in March 2015 also did not take place. However, India soon realised that, given the shared strategic and security concerns of the two countries in the Indian Ocean Region, there can be no alternative to partnership. Dialogue has to be a permanent feature in the bilateral relations.

Thus, in October 2015, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, visited Maldives and co-chaired the 5th Joint Commission Meeting where defence and security relationship were part of the discussion in the Joint Commission for the first time. The Joint statement spelt out that bilateral partnership was important for maintaining security in the Indian Ocean Region. Further it was decided that defence cooperation would include construction of Composite Training Centre for the Maldivian National Defence Forces, coordinated patrolling, training programs for MNDF officers in India, medical camps etc. ^{xxxv}

Earlier in August 2015, India finished setting up of the first phase of coastal radar system for Maldives which included setting up of three radars. This would enable, the MNDF to track ships and fishing boats and provide added security in the Maldives Exclusive Economic Zone. It would provide all-weather 24-hour sea coverage. ^{xxxvi}

In December 2015, India granted US\$ 240,000 to Maldives to establish facilities to operate two helicopters donated by India in 2010. An Indian Navy ship arrived in Maldives in December 2015 and conducted EEZ surveillance for two days along with the Maldivian Coast Guard.

One of the agreements concluded during the April 2016 visit of Maldives President is the Action Plan for defence cooperation. It envisages an institutional mechanism at the level of defence secretaries to further bilateral defence cooperation. Thus, the Modi government sought to stop the drift in the relations.

CMAG

In March 2015, the former Maldives President Nasheed was arrested and sentenced to jail for thirteen years on charges of terrorism.^{xxxvii} Later allowed to travel to Britain on medical grounds, he has presently been granted refugee status^{xxxviii}. At the Commonwealth Summit in Malta in November 2015, some countries observed that political opposition and free media were being suppressed in Maldives and there was no independent judiciary.^{xxxix} The CMAG, of which India too is a member, was subsequently formed. In the CMAG meetings held so far, Maldives has been discussed but the group decided “not to place Maldives on its agenda”.^{xl} The next CMAG meeting is scheduled for September 2016. A positive development has been that at the request of Maldives government, Willy Mutunga – the Chief Justice of Kenya – has been appointed as Commonwealth Secretary General’s Envoy to Maldives.^{xli} He has to support a sustainable political dialogue process, leading to stronger climate of pluralism and inclusive elections in 2018 and strengthening of democratic institutions and culture in Maldives.

Conclusion

This essay argues that an effective strategy to address India’s concerns on maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region cannot be isolated from the overall cordial bilateral relations that India has with Maldives. This, despite every government in Maldives deepening its relations with China; a lack of clarity on what Maldives means by India First policy; and the uncertain democracy trajectory in Maldives.

India’s dilemma is whether to prioritise governance issues in Maldives over the Indian Ocean security issues with China deepening its footprints; and rise of radicalism in Maldives^{xlii}. Former President Nasheed plans to form a government in exile and expects India to support it, which he is unlikely to get. Maldives will again come up for discussion in CMAG in September 2016 and the island country needs India’s support. Nasheed, however, wants the CMAG to censure Maldives. For India, strategic

cooperation with Maldives is important. However, for long term stability and security of Maldives, and to meet India's own security concerns, democracy has to thrive.^{xliii} India should engage in strengthening democracy through the CMAG; have official and unofficial channels of communication with all the stakeholders in Maldives including Nasheed; and put forward its maritime security concerns to them. Most important Prime Minister Modi should visit the island country soon.

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