

India's Maldivian Rapprochement

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Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, recently concluded his first overseas visit after assuming office for the second term – a rather successful attempt at demonstrating India's "Neighbourhood First" Policy. The visit to the Maldives resulted in the two nations signing a total of six MoUs, of which three were related to maritime issues, implying that the government is taking greater cognisance of the country's engagements and interactions within the maritime domain – which will hopefully spur maritime awareness amongst India's policy-makers and civil society at large.

This piece seeks to provide a brief overview of this latest prime-ministerial visit and highlight the maritime aspects relevant to this extremely encouraging trend, for the benefit of the public at large.

India's efforts at sustaining harmonious relations with the littoral States have been gaining pace, not merely as geopolitical counters to the growing Chinese investments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), but, far more importantly, as natural manifestations of India's pursuit of its own maritime interests within this western portion of the broader Indo-Pacific. In a carefully calibrated move, PM Modi had ensured the presence of leaders of BIMSTEC nations (to which were added Kyrgyzstan and Mauritius) at his swearing-in ceremony in May 2019. With the Maldives, in particular, the Indian government has been trying to make lost ground and reinvigorate ties that had waned significantly under the former presidency of Mr Abdulla Yameen.

Apart from enjoying geographical proximity, India and the Maldives share traditional bonds of friendship – ethnically, linguistically, culturally, religiously as well as commercially. Maldives, as a strategically-located archipelagic nation, is of prime importance to India, as also to China, which has been vying for a sustainable presence in the IOR. With the Maldives being located just 700 km from the Indian mainland, any increase in the Chinese footprint upon it poses an immediate challenge to India's neighbourhood-policies, as also its several geostrategies within the broader Indo-Pacific.

India, has always been amongst the [first responders](#) to any crisis in her neighbourhood. With particular reference to the Maldives, the latter has benefited from India's notable alacrity in providing assistance. Examples range from the Indian political and military assistance in 1988 when Maldives suffered a serious coup attempt, to the more recent water crisis of 2014. Such actions by India have contributed significantly to the projection and sustenance of an image of India as a benevolent and friendly neighbour and, in so doing, has enhanced the camaraderie between the two nations. However, all this notwithstanding, the bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Malé has seen its fair share of highs and lows. During the presidency of Mr Abdulla Yameen, [ties deteriorated](#) sharply when the pro-China leader imposed restrictions on work visas for Indians, followed by his signing a Free Trade Agreement with China. Yameen further aggravated matters by declining India's invitation to take part in the biennial eight-day mid-level naval interaction, MILAN, in early-2018.

However, in late 2018, Maldives witnessed another political upheaval, with Ibrahim Solih taking over the presidency and inviting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to his swearing-in ceremony. This of course, immediately signalled an associated dilution in the island nation's '[China tilt](#)'. Solih's government has, since then, repeatedly affirmed the country's 'India-First Policy', pledging [full support to the deepening of the multifaceted, mutually-beneficial partnership](#) between the two maritime neighbours.

Both leaders have reiterated their determination to work towards a shared vision of inclusive development and cooperative regionalism through India's 'Neighbourhood First' Policy and the 'India-First' Policy of the Maldives. Encouragingly, maritime cooperation in the IOR has been the [centrepiece](#) of the Modi-Solih discussions. While Solih's predecessor openly came out in support of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and favoured Chinese largesse for major infrastructure projects offered by Beijing, Solih has been trying hard to mend India-Maldives ties, which had been so disdainfully discarded by Yameen. This is paying dividends to Malé, and new relationship has seen the Indian government pledge US\$[1.4 billion](#) by way of a [financial assistance](#) package to Maldives, in December 2018. It is important to remember that the exchequer of the Maldives is currently weighed down by a \$3 billion Chinese debt, and this package would significantly help in allowing the Solih-government to progress its economic agenda, while relieving at least part of the debt-burden imposed by Beijing.

It is an open secret that Beijing and New Delhi have both been competing to pursue their respective national interests in the IOR. The intensity of their competition over the geographically strategically positioned island-States of the IOR is evident in their

respective foreign policy manifestations. Spread over an area greater than 90,000 sq km, Maldives, with its 1,200 islands has, especially in the recent past, been seen by Beijing as a key component of the Chinese investment route along the BRI. According to the [Centre for Global Development](#), some of the major Chinese investments in the Maldives have included US \$830 million-worth of upgradation of the Maldives airport, a 2 km-long bridge linking the airport to the capital city of Malé, a 25-storey apartment complex, etc.

While the increasing influence of Beijing in Maldives has certainly increased the IOR's risk-quotient for India, the current Indian and the Maldivian leaderships appear quite resolute in their respective stances of maintaining peace and security in the IOR through joint cooperation. Being conscious of each other's interests, the two nations, during the recent visit of Prime Minister Modi this month, signed a number of MoUs. One such MoU was an agreement on the sharing of White Shipping data between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). A 'White Shipping Agreement' (WSA), as it is commonly known, is an [information-network technical protocol](#) that allows navies to exchange information on merchant ships operating in their oceanic proximity. Although a WSA specifically excludes 'grey shipping' (i.e., military vessels) and 'black shipping' (i.e., illegal vessels), it does permit merchant vessels to be identified and tracked, thereby greatly reducing the number of 'unknown' entities in a given maritime space. While India has signed WSAs with 14 countries (as also with the 'Virtual Regional Maritime Traffic Centre' [VRMTC] comprising 34 Mediterranean countries¹ and 5 that are members of the Trans Regional Maritime Network²), efforts at developing an even more effective regional Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) are continuing apace. In this regional endeavour, the WSA signed with Maldives plays a very important part. The two leaders also jointly inaugurated the Composite Training Facility of the MNDF in Maafilafushi and the Coastal Surveillance Radar System, by remote link, all of which further strengthen their bilateral relations.

In respect of bilateral trade, India and Maldives have enjoyed 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status with each other since the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement on March 31, 1981. Insofar as people-to-people interaction goes, the [Maldivian Tourism Ministry](#) stated that, 83,019 Indian tourists had visited the Maldives by the end of December, 2017, which was a 24% increase from 2016. In view of such a heavy movement of both goods and people, the two maritime neighbours also concluded a Memorandum of

¹ Albania, Algeria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Montenegro, Morocco, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Slovenia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, UK, USA, and Ukraine

² Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Singapore and South Africa

Understanding (MoU) for the ‘Establishment of Passenger and Cargo Services by Sea’ between the India’s Ministry of Shipping, and the Maldivian Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, as one of the six agreements signed during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister in June this year. This will go a long way in exploiting the ‘soft power element’ of the relationship.

As India has become a fast-growing [destination](#) for Maldivian tourists, the two leaders also agreed to launch a [ferry service](#) between Kerala’s Kochi port and the Maldivian capital, Male, via Kulhudhuffushi atoll. This service aims to improve connectivity between India and Maldives by linking the 700 km-long route between Kochi and Male and the 500 km one between Kochi and Kulhudhuffushi.

Apart from these two agreements, an [MoU on Cooperation in the field of hydrography](#) between the Indian Navy and the MNDF, was also signed. According to a UN study, [50%](#) of coastal States lack hydrographic capabilities. India, in sharp contrast, has well-developed hydrographic capabilities that enjoy globally-renown, and has, in the past carried out hydrographic surveys for Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Maldives, Oman, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. Before signing the MoU with Maldives, India had already established similar agreements with Mauritius, Tanzania, Seychelles, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, for hydrographic cooperation.

It is clear that the new leadership of the Maldives and the recently re-elected Modi government in India have jointly committed themselves towards strengthening maritime security in the IOR. This joint endeavour is being progressed through a mutual understanding that involves enhancing surveillance, exchange of information, increasing MDA, capacity-building, and, capability-enhancement. A cooperative, rules-based and inclusive approach underpins the Indian as well as the Maldivian foreign-policy framework. This excellent start at strengthening the bilateral relations between New Delhi and Male, will contribute significantly to the preservation of peace, the promotion of stability, and the maintenance of security within the region, and is entirely in line with the principles of net maritime security enunciated by the Indian Navy in its 2015 strategy document, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*.

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