

India and Maldives: A Triumph for Maritime Diplomacy

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The Indian Navy deployed an Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) Mk –III aircraft together with aircrew and a support team to Maldives on 27th April, to assist the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) in “coastal surveillance and reconnaissance”. This came close on the heels of the visit of the Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen to India earlier in the month. At the end of that visit, President Yameen had declared India to be the “most important friend of Maldives” and had committed to pursuing an “India-first” foreign policy. These events assume significance especially in the context of recent turbulence in bilateral engagement between Indian and Maldives.

Maldives’ tryst with democracy, which began in 2008, has been marked by agonistic politics that has caused unrest within, and apprehensions outside the island country. President Nasheed’s resignation in 2012, followed by the elections of 2013, have somewhat dented the fledgling democratic processes. The subsequent arrest of former President Nasheed under charges of terrorism and his trial which resulted in a 13-year jail sentence, underscored the fragility of government institutions within the country. The cancellation of the USD 500 million Male Airport project in 2012, awarded

to the Indian infrastructure company GMR, prompted the Indian Government to suspend its aid to Maldives.

In such an environment, for India, a historical friend of Maldives, political and diplomatic engagement became difficult with the island country. This was evident in the last-minute cancellation of Prime Minister Modi's planned visit to Male in March 2015. Significantly, Maldives is the only SAARC country that PM Modi has not visited yet. President Yameen on the other hand has visited India thrice since assuming office; the first time in January 2014, followed by the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014 and now in April 2016. Notwithstanding this, it may be some time before diplomatic relations with Maldives pick up momentum, considering the current situation in the island country.

What has been a triumph of sorts, is the sustained naval engagement between the Indian Navy and the MNDF even during these trouble times. The first ALH that was transferred to the MNDF in 2010 which is based at Gan and operated by a crew from the Indian Coast Guard, continues to carry out Search and Rescue (SAR), medical evacuation and surveillance missions. The Indian Government's commitment to provide relief to Maldives during the water crisis of December 2014 was spearheaded by the Indian Navy, which deployed two ships to Male with potable water carried from India. These ships remained in Male, generating water through their onboard reverse osmosis plants until the water treatment plant at Male became operational. The Indian Naval Fleet's pride, the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, together with the destroyer INS Mysore and tanker INS Deepak visited Male earlier in February this year. Though the high profile ship visits had raised hopes of a coinciding visit by PM Modi, which was not to be. Indian Naval and Coast Guard ships and aircraft continue to provide surveillance support to the MNDF in their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and personnel from the MNDF continue to train at Indian Naval training establishments. The transfer now, of the latest variant of the ALH helicopter is yet another significant event in the continuing naval engagement between India and Maldives.

While it would be tempting to look at India's engagement with Maldives and other regional states purely through the prism of preventing a pro-China proclivity in these countries, India's relations with them predate the arrival of the Chinese and their navy in these waters. Geography cannot simply be wished away, as can't India's obligations as a regional power and a net security provider in the region. India's historical, cultural and demographic ties with these countries place a greater burden of responsibility than the demands of realpolitik and aspirational power play. The fact of course, that vacuums in this space will be promptly filled by an eager Chinese machinery with an abundance of cash must be factored in, especially when ratcheting down diplomatic or military ties with regional states.

In a period where diplomatic ties between India and Maldives continue to be stressed due to the political environment in Maldives, it would be vital for India to sustain its robust naval engagement, driven primarily by the shared security needs of the two countries and the region as a whole. The NSA-level India-Sri Lanka- Maldives trilateral group on maritime cooperation could play a key role in achieving the desired levels of trust and mutual support in the maritime domain. The agreement on defence cooperation that was signed during President Yameen's recent visit promises to further institutionalize maritime cooperation between the two countries. While it may not necessarily bring about an immediate thaw in the frostiness that has set in since 2012 between India and Maldives, it will at least ensure that the maritime forces of these countries continue to execute their diplomatic charter for the greater good of the region.

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