

India Needs Maldives as an Ally in the Indian Ocean

NARENDER KUMAR

Introduction

The geographical location of Maldives makes it one of the strategically significant archipelagoes in the northern Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Maldives consists of 1,190 coral islands spread over an area of approximately 860 km. It is situated on top of one of the busiest Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) in the world. Maldives is approximately 717 km from Sri Lanka and 430 km from India's southern island of Lakshadweep. The total area of the country is approximately 90,000 sq km and its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is 859,000 sq km. Historically, the Maldivians were converted to Islam from Buddhism in the 12th century. Under the 1997 Constitution, Islam is the only religion practised in public in the country. As per the 2010 census, 99 percent of the people are Muslims.

Maldives is strategically located right on top of the East-West shipping route that transports oil from the Middle East to East Asia and has drawn the attention of many major powers like the US, China, Russia, UK and, quite naturally, India. The latest great power that has set its eyes on this island nation is China.¹ There are three factors that need to be examined while discussing Maldives: geostrategic location, China factor and radicalisation of the population. These issues have a profound impact on how Maldives will position itself, as an ally of India or a not so friendly nation: whether Maldives remains an unstable plateau that could swing either towards China and the Islamic world or remains a cornerstone for India's Indian Ocean strategy. The permanent presence of

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) or the toehold of Pakistan's Intra-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Maldives is likely to be a major threat to India. Therefore, India must work hard to ensure that, as far as possible, its neighbours do not feel the need to call in external powers to balance it.² However, it also opens up the competition for foreign aid between India and China in the instant case. This will certainly give leverage to Maldives and other neighbours to play the China card to extract the maximum benefits from both nations. The Republic of Saudi Arabia is a fountainhead of ideological mentoring of Wahhabism in Maldives. Saudi Arabia has pumped in huge amounts of money for religious purposes and the building of Wahhabi/Salafi mosques. As a result, Sufi Islam that was once most practised in Maldives, has been marginalised. Wahhabism is considered as one of the main sources of radicalisation in Maldives. Notwithstanding the above, Maldives is certainly an important nation for India to remain a dominant power in the northern IOR.

Geostrategic Location of Maldives

The northern IOR has one of the busiest SLOCs in the world through which almost 90,000 vessels cross every year, transporting 9.84 billion tonnes of commercial goods per year. There is trans-shipment of 36 million barrels of crude oil per day, equivalent to about 64 percent of oil trade passing through the Indian Ocean from the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb and Malacca.³ Maldives sits across this vital SLOC with a north-south geographical spread of approximately 860 km. Apart from the IOR Rim nations, France, Britain and the US have their bases in the IOR. Military bases by countries not aligned to India's strategic interest in Maldives will certainly erode India's strategic influence in the region. One could say that any military presence that compromises India's dominant position in the northern IOR will certainly be detrimental to India's security, economic and strategic interests. Island territories along the major SLOCs could act as listening posts and unsinkable aircraft carriers. The military presence of extra-regional players having competing strategic interests will undermine India's maritime influence in the IOR.

China Factor in Maldives: China has more than 20 government and privately-sponsored projects "ranging from big infrastructure projects (airport, bridge), housing, hotels and urban infrastructure". The estimated Chinese investment in the abovementioned areas is over \$1.5 billion, putting the islands into even greater debt.⁴ A change of government in Maldives is certainly in India's interest, however, Maldives may not completely ignore China, given the economic and

Chinese military base in Maldives will complete encirclement of India.

military rise of the latter. More so, Maldives may not like to be seen as a satellite state of India. China's interests in Maldives are driven by six factors: first, it enjoys a privileged location at the crossroads of global trade, connecting the major engines of the international economy in the northern Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. This is particularly important in an era in which global shipping has burgeoned.⁵ Second, 84 percent of China's energy requirement flows through the Indian Ocean SLOCs. In addition, IOR Rim nations are one of the biggest markets for Chinese commercial goods, having a population of approximately two billion. Third, China can use the ports being developed in Maldives for a dual purpose so as to secure its energy and commercial interests. Fourth, bases in Maldives will give China an opportunity to explore deep sea mining. Fifth, Chinese presence in Maldives will ensure uninterrupted flow of energy and container ships through the SLOCs in the IOR. Sixth, China will also be able to checkmate the US in the IOR by sitting right on top of the SLOCs and interposing between Diego Garcia and the SLOCs. Therefore, China, apart from Hambantota, Gwadar and Djibouti, is in the process of establishing a permanent presence in the centre of the northern Indian Ocean.

Radicalisation of the Population: Maldives is a nation with almost 99 percent Muslim population. Non-Muslims cannot become citizens of the archipelago. The nation has seen a sharp divide between hardliners and moderate Muslims. The radicalisation of the youth picked up post 2013 when the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began. In fact, Maldives made one of the highest per capita contributions to the ISIS. As per Andreas Johansson, Director of the Swedish South Asian Studies Network (SASNET), Lund University, more than 200 Maldivians were fighting for the IS in Iraq and Syria.⁶ Sufi practitioners of Islam blame the radicalisation to Saudi Arabia that is spreading Wahhabi doctrines across the country. International relations scholar Azra Naseem also sees a pattern between the radicalisation of Maldivians and the influence of Saudi Arabia.⁷ A moderate society is now completely under the Salafi/Wahhabi ideologues who forbid even a discussion of other religions in Maldives. Though there is no official restriction on the practise of Sufism, which is so much a part of South Asian Islam, Sufism is discouraged in Maldives, even though not outlawed.⁸ Maldives is becoming a maritime pivot for the spread of Wahhabi Islam in South Asia, including Sri Lanka. This has far-reaching consequences not only for Maldives but also South Asia because the hardline, violent form of Islam, coinciding with the return of ISIS

jihadi terrorists of Maldives from Syria and Iraq could give a foothold to the ISIS to establish its maritime arm in Maldives. Such a situation will be detrimental to India due to its Muslim majority Lakshadweep Islands, with coastal India not too far. The bigger danger is Pakistan attempting to use Maldives as a springboard to infiltrate radicalised cadres of the ISIS/AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) to cause instability in the Indian peninsula.

Maldives: An Ally India Needs

The relationship between the two nations during the run-up to the elections in Maldives had hit rock-bottom and in a snub to India, the Yameen government had asked India to take back the gifts that India had extended as a friendly neighbour. At the same time, Maldives allowed China to dock three warships in its port, sending a strong message to India to stay away from Maldives. Notwithstanding the rocky relationship with the Yameen government, the best bet for India is to wait for the elections and expect a more favourable government of the Maldivian Democratic Party to take charge. India needs Maldives as an ally and dependable strategic partner so that this most vital strategic archipelago in the Indian Ocean is not exploited by nations whose interests clash with those of India. Maldives has an outsized strategic importance for India, given its location astride the sea lanes through which much of India's shipping cargo passes.⁹ As Brahma Chellaney says, "China has this ambition—if it were to turn one of the leased islands into a military base, it would open a maritime front against India and complete India's strategic encirclement."¹⁰

Maldives sits just 1,200 km away from the Indian mainland.¹¹ The Indian state of Kerala and the Lakshadweep Union Territory are in close proximity to Maldives. There are concerns about the possible use of Maldives' territory against India by China as well as the ISI of Pakistan. These concerns get importance in the light of the fact that the November 2008 cross-border terrorist attack in Mumbai was made possible from across the sea.¹² The more significant aspect is that approximately 97 percent of India's international trade by volume and 75 percent by value passes through the Indian Ocean.¹³ As a consequence, India cannot afford anyone else overlooking its backyard and monitoring its maritime military and non-military shipping activities. Secure sea lanes are crucial for India, thus, Maldives as an ally is essential for the maritime security of India and also to pursue its Indian Ocean strategy.

It will be a miscalculation to presume that China is completely out of the Maldives. However, it has given India an opportunity to recalibrate its policy

India can assist Maldives by socio economic development and wean it away from Chinese influence.

not only towards Maldives, but also in relation to the other neighbours. China will remain an influential player in Maldives, given its financial leverage over the country. Indian analysts say an estimated 80 percent of Maldives' total debt, equivalent to about 25 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is owed to China.¹⁴ China's engagement with Maldives is at both government and private levels. It is noteworthy that China had sent 300,000 tourists to Maldives in 2017. This is quite significant. In the meantime, China was also in the process of opening some resorts in Maldives to have an absolute presence in the Indian Ocean in the garb of promoting tourism.¹⁵ Hence, for India to believe that the China factor can be neutralised by a change of government is far from reality. China has managed to bring employment and business to the people of Maldives and this connection will not be easy to sever unless India is able to replace China as the main economic and security partner.

How does India Develop Enduring Relations with Maldives?

India and Maldives share longstanding cultural, social, economic and strategic relations since 1965. India is the closest neighbour that has always reached out to Maldives during a crisis—be it the 1988 coup or water shortage on the archipelago at various point in time. The education, medical and tourism sectors have institutional and people-to-people contacts with Maldives. What India needs to do at this stage is not to focus on replacing China, but to consolidate the traditional ties, build sustainable partnerships and to assist the Government of Maldives to meet the promises made by the Solih government to the people.

During Prime Minster Modi's visit to Maldives, he had made a firm commitment to assist Maldives to achieve sustainable social and economic development.¹⁶ Maldives is facing a major problem with regard to housing, potable drinking water and sewage treatment on some of the islands. The Maldives government will be looking forward to India's assistance in the development of housing, availability of potable water and social amenities that directly impact public perceptions and living conditions.

The India-Maldives defence forces have had a long and deep engagement with each other. This is an area that needs to be strengthened. India must endeavour

to establish a permanent military training team, and maritime security and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) advisory teams in Maldives. However, these initiatives should not be seen as surveillance or India's military outposts. India could also look at a mobile naval medical hospital based on a ship, with some ground infrastructure at selected islands.

There is a need to increase people-to-people contacts—this is one of the most enduring measures of developing relations between the two countries. India could also look at the education sector as one of the key areas of cooperation. India must offer some vacancies in Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), medical and higher education in premiere institutions to the students of Maldives. Today's intellectuals will be tomorrow's leaders of that country. India must also increase the number of commercial flights to Maldives to assist tourists to visit that country.

With the rise in radicalisation, there is always a lurking threat to democracy in Maldives. There could be a situation where the returning ISIS cadres of Maldivian origin, radicals and Jamaat-e-Islami may pursue the demand for the Islamic State and establishment of Nizam-e-Mustafa. That will mark the end of democracy in Maldives. It will also create serious security issues in Lakshadweep and the Indian peninsula. Therefore, India must assist Maldives in counter-terrorism and intelligence to prevent the spread of Islamic terrorism in its backyard.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with India on November 1, 1965, relations between the two countries have been marked by continued friendship, outstanding cooperation and beneficial bilateralism.¹⁷ However, to maintain enduring relations, there is a need to upgrade the cooperation by giving an impetus at the economic, social, and diplomatic levels. Maldives is home to some 22,000 Indians. Of the country's approximately 400 doctors, more than 125 are Indians. Similarly, around 25 percent of the teachers are Indians.¹⁸ India must utilise this soft power to build bridges with the archipelago.

China has money and determination to pursue and recalibrate its relations with the current government since Maldives is vital for its Indian Ocean strategy. Therefore, India cannot handle the relationship with Maldives at a bureaucratic pace. India will have to move fast to meet the commitment made by the Modi

government and ensure that the current Maldivian government meets the promises made to the people with the help of India. Change of government in Maldives should not be considered as a guarantee for rebuilding the relationship at the strategic level. India must always remain in the overall frame of development of Maldives. Similarly, there is a need to discreetly remind the people of Maldives of how China has treated its own Muslim citizens in Xinjiang. Thus, people need to be told that China has an ulterior motive in helping Muslims abroad and persecuting Muslims at home.

Brig **Narender Kumar** is presently Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation, The United Service Institution of India.

Notes

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