



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

07/18

POST MALDIVES: CHINA STARTS DRAWING ITS POUND OF FLESH

Gp Capt Ashok K Chordia (Retd.)
Senior Fellow, CAPS

Keywords: Maldives, China, Sino-Maldives relation, IOR

Early last month, a decision of the Maldivian Supreme Court led to a confrontation between President Yameen on one side, and the Judiciary, the Police and the opposition parties on the other. The implementation of the court order would have transferred the control of the parliament to the opposition coalition along with the power to impeach the president. Yameen refused to comply with the decision and instead, declared a state of emergency. He imprisoned some prominent Maldivians including the former president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,¹ dismissed top police officers² and revoked the Supreme Court Order. Yameen systematically weakened the institutions of government to remain in power. Yameen's state of emergency decree was undermining the checks and balances necessary in any functioning democracy.³

Yameen's actions caused uproar; people took to streets. The exiled former President, Mohammed Nasheed, and other political leaders sought intervention by foreign countries. While

India, the US, and the European Union disapproved Yameen's actions and called on him to implement the court's ruling, China warned against military intervention in the internal matters of the Maldives. Occasional presence of its warships in the eastern Indian Ocean in the last few days was reported by the media as a subtle warning to India to refrain from military intervention.

A closer look at Yameen's daring against the opposition by his own people suggested that he was enjoying Chinese support. A support that was *conditional*--in return for a foothold in the archipelago, which would grant strategic advantage to the Chinese--perhaps, eyes and ears to pry on India's activities in the region. Besides the political crisis, there are signs of radicalisation and influence of ISIS on the people--200 Maldivians have reportedly joined ISIS. Among others, a geography that makes life difficult for the people is at the root of the crisis. Politically and economically in dire straits, it



would be difficult for the Maldives to recover from this situation in the near future. The dictatorial behaviour of the Maldivian President, supported by the Chinese, has caused grave concern in the region.

The endgame was very difficult to predict because no country of the region, except India, seemed to be getting adversely affected by the happenings in its (India's) neighbourhood. Japan, Australia and the US--the other members of the Quad--could not or would not look beyond Yameen's arrogance, into the implications of Chinese entrenching into the Maldives. They limited their action to urging Yameen to adhere to democratic norms.

While the embers of the current crisis in the Maldives are still glowing, an incident in the sea East of China has re-ignited the issue. Japan has reported to the UN about a tanker Xin Yuan 18 (with Maldivian Registration) transferring goods to a North Korean Ship Chon Ma San⁴ on high seas in violation of UN Security Council sanctions. Late on Saturday (February 24, 2018) night, a P3C aircraft of the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force had spotted the two ships in the open waters about 250 km east of Shanghai. Since the two ships lay alongside each other at night with lights switched on, it was concluded that some transfer of goods was taking place between the ships.

As expected, Maldives responded saying that it took the UN sanctions against N Korea

seriously and was investigating the issue. The Transport Authority of the Maldives confirmed that Xin Yuan 18--the Maldivian flag bearing ship in question--was not registered with it. It was also confirmed that Maldives does not allow flag of convenience to ships registered in foreign countries. The Maldivian Government concluded that the use of Maldivian flag by the Xin Yuan 18, was violation of Maldivian laws and regulations. It has not been confirmed whether it was a Chinese ship, as its name suggested. China has been circumventing UN sanctions against North Korea.⁵

At first, it was occupation of islands in the Maldives; now China seems to be flouting the UN sanctions. Its actions do not augur well for the region. A magnified domino effect of these will be felt by the rest of the world the US included in due course of time. All countries are likely to suffer later due to collective inaction at this point of time. This incident could well be a wake-up call for all.

Meanwhile, what can India do to safeguard its interests? While India has raised the issue and is pursuing it on all fronts, it is time to take a relook at two offers made by Mauritius and the Seychelles respectively to create infrastructure on their islands. In 2012, Mauritius had offered two islands to India in an effort to preserve a tax treaty. The islands could be used to develop hotels and tourist resorts or for strategic presence. One of the Agalega Islands offered to

India had an airstrip too.⁶Likewise, a joint plan between India and the Seychelles to develop a military base on Assumption Island has found favour with the country's politicians. It was to be funded by India and shared by the two countries. The deal was struck in principle during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the Seychelles in 2015. The progress thereafter has been slow.

Subject to other considerations, if any, for its strategic interest, India would do well to pursue these offers, and look for more in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Sam Meredith, "Trouble in paradise: All you need to know about the Maldives' ongoing political crisis," @smeredith19, February 8, 2018. Available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/08/maldives-crisis-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-political-turmoil.html>. Accessed on February 11, 2018.

² "Maldives acting police chief fired," *Maldives Independent*, February 3, 2018, available at <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-acting-police-chief-fired-135589>. Accessed on February 16, 2018.

³ Mederith, n. 1.

⁴ The US has designated Chon Ma San as a sanction target.

⁵ Indrani Bagchi, "Japan complains against Maldives-flagged ship for 'transfer' of goods to N Korea vessel," *The Times of India*, March 1, 2018, p. 22.

⁶ "Mauritius offers India 2 islands in an effort to preserve tax treaty," *The Times of India*, July 6, 2012.