



## India-Maldives Relations: Revival of a Historic Partnership

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The recent state visit of the newly elected Maldivian President H.E Ibrahim Mohamed Solih to India from 16-18 December 2018 has signaled the revitalization of relations between India and the Maldives. The visit has garnered much attention as president Solih's first state visit and indicates a more India focused foreign policy as compared to the previously existing pro-China foreign policy of Maldives. Also, Maldives is a vital cog in the geopolitics of Indian Ocean because of its strategically advantageous position capable to monitor most of the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean, which facilitates a major share in global trade. President Ibrahim Solih's victory has certainly boosted India's position and interests against the Chinese growing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Beginning from 2009 until Solih's 2018 electoral victory, China's influence in the Maldives had increased multi-fold mainly due to its economic clout through investments, infrastructural projects and financial aid. Additionally, China was able to manoeuvre the Maldivian politics favourable to its interests by

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supporting and backing the strong man rule by the then President Abdullah Yameen since November 2013.

Domestically, the Maldives under President Yameen was marred with widespread political turmoil and vendetta against the opposition and dispute between the President and the Supreme Court resulting in National Emergency being declared in February 2018. While India opposed Yameen's one upmanship in ruling the country, China saw this as an opportunity to pursue its interest in the Maldives by favouring Yameen's government. Hence, under Yameen the tilt away from a pro-India policy towards a more China friendly foreign policy which was strategising its role in the IOR, was a blow to India's interests in the region.

### Indo-Maldivian Relations – Background

Indo-Maldivian relations can be divided into four phases: Post Independence Era (1965-1988), Post Op Cactus Era (1988-2013), Yameen Era (2013-2018), Post Yameen Era (present)). The

Indo-Maldivian relations witnessed new horizons of cooperation with diplomatic visits and signing of few agreements under Indira Gandhi administration in 1970s. However, the relations did not take much decisive turns, till the year 1988 except for one bitter episode in 1982. During the Maldivian Independence Day celebrations in 1982, the then President Gayoom's Brother Abdulla Hameed declared Minicoy Island as part of the Maldives.<sup>1</sup> This event fluttered the steady faring bilateral relations between the two countries, but soon President Gayoom negated his brother's declaration on Minicoy Island by clarifying that Maldives has no political claims on the island apart from some cultural and historical relations with this Island. From India's point of view this was the only blemish in the 53 years of India-Maldives relations.

In November 1988 when the island nation was threatened by a coup attempt against the rule of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, conducted by PLOTE<sup>2</sup> mercenaries backed by Abdullah Luthufi, a prominent Maldivian business person<sup>3</sup>, the Maldivian authorities requested for external help, to which India responded with swift military action (Operation Cactus) and saved the nation and its government. Operation Cactus was one the finest piece of military operations ever conducted by the Indian Armed Forces<sup>4</sup> as it successfully contained the threat and even captured many mercenaries alive. The Operation helped India assert its importance as a dependable regional power in the IOR especially for its smaller neighbours such as Maldives. Subsequently, President Gayoom considered India as a valuable partner and aligned with India in regional and global groupings. During Gayoom's presidency, Maldives was dependent on India on a wide spectrum, stretching from economic aid to the large inflow of professionals to work in the Maldives. Thus, India was viewed as an integral part of Maldivian existence, as its influence and Diaspora played a major role in Maldivian economy and society.

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Post Gayoom, after the introduction of multi party democracy and Nasheed's accession to power through free and fair electoral process in 2008, India managed to uphold its grip in the partnership. Both the nations tried to further strengthen the ties especially in managing the security of the island chain. During 2009, then Defence Minister of India, Mr. A.K. Antony visited Maldives along with a team of naval experts who were experienced and familiar with managing security of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India offered to extend help in managing the security of the archipelago nation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, both the countries signed an agreement to station two Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) along with its operating crew on a mission to assist the Maldivian forces. Discussions were also held regarding the provisions in interlinking the radar networks of both countries under Indian Coastal Command, which would give India a seamless radar picture of the entire region. India also assured that the Indian Coast Guard will carry out Dornier sorties to look out for suspicious movements or vessels which may result in a coup like situation similar to 1988. The meeting was a significant development towards the induction of Maldives into Indian security grid under Southern Indian Naval Command headquartered at Kochi. This paved the way for Maldivian military teams to visit the tri-services command in Andaman and Nicobar Islands to observe and learn about the security management of a similar island chain<sup>6</sup>.

However, since 2009, the Chinese influence began to grow in the island nation especially after Yameen took over the government by force in November 2013. There were high level diplomatic visits including the visit of President Xi to Male in 2014, financial aid and investments in infrastructural projects. China was able to pump money into infrastructural development in Maldives including \$830 million project to upgrade the airport replacing GMR Airport Limited, a company of Indian origin and \$400

million Bridge linking two islands.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that, prior to China's investments in infrastructural projects in the island nation, India was the leading developmental partner and had established institutions including Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH), Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET), and India-Maldives Friendship Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies.<sup>8</sup> Also, India's trade with Maldives saw a steady growth between 2010-2015 from \$127 million to \$206 million.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the growing influence of China, India came to the rescue of Maldives once again in December 2014, from an unconventional threat of water shortage. On December 04, 2014, the island country's only desalination plant collapsed which resulted in acute water shortage. Responding to a call of help from the Maldivian government, India sent its heavy lift aircrafts including C-17s and IL 76s carrying more than 200 tonnes of freshwater.<sup>10</sup> Additionally India also sent two of its navy vessels INS Deepak and INS Sukanya capable of processing 35 tonnes of freshwater using their onboard desalinization plants.<sup>11</sup> Thus India preserved its track record of swift response to its friend Maldives call for help and reasserted its strategic importance as the first responder to the crises in the IOR.

### The Shift

The Indo-Maldivian relation for long was devoid of irritants such as diplomatic conflagrations, economic contestation, fear of intervention etc especially after Indian forces squashed the coup attempt orchestrated by PLOTE in 1988. This 'fool-proof' Indo-Maldivian relation began to lose its lustre soon after the Yameen administration started detention of his political rivals and potential adversaries. Political persecution and inessential emergency declaration and extension of emergency periods drew worldwide condemnations especially from democratic countries including, India, UK and the US. The detention of former president Nasheed further escalated protests both domestically and

internationally and India too raised its concern over the arrest of Nasheed. Given the sensitivity of the situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was prompted to omit Maldives from his visit to four Indian Ocean Neighbours in 2015.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, China which was extensively investing in Maldives through several developmental projects, offered its unwavering support to Yameen's administration against all external threats and aggressions. This heralded a new age of Sino-Maldivian cooperation and the waning of Indo-Maldivian relations.

Maldives under President Yameen, co-ventured and facilitated Chinese influence and investments through constitutional amendments allowing foreign ownership of Maldivian lands<sup>13</sup> and by signing a Free Trade Agreement with China<sup>14</sup>. This rolled out the red carpet for the opportunistic Chinese companies to this tropical paradise. China even leased a couple of islands and was engaged in developmental projects such as, Friendship Bridge which connects the islands of Malé and Hulhulé and the modernization of Hulhulé airport.<sup>15</sup> Thus Maldives shifted its economical, developmental and diplomatic dependence on China and became a vital cog in China's Indian Ocean plans.

India's stance on the Maldivian domestic politics and power struggle was objected by the administration which also disapproved India's condemnation of the extension of emergency by Yameen's administration. For Yameen's government India was an old friend, a friend to the old governments, and the administration feared an Indian military intervention as a response to imprisoned Nasheed's call. This could be seen as the biggest factor which forced Maldivian government to resort to a Chinese friendship in order to nullify the fear of an Indian military intervention in spite of the extension of the emergency period. The fear of Indian military intervention was so deeply perceived that Male asserted its demand towards New Delhi to withdraw two of India's military helicopters and its operational personnel stationed at Maldives

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to assist Male in its coastal surveillance as per the agreements in 2009. New Delhi passively ignored several deadlines issued by Male over the issue of withdrawal of helicopters from the island nation. In later period, India's actions contributed to the shift, for instance New Delhi lobbied in favour of Indonesia over Maldives in the 2018 UN Security Council elections which resulted in a humiliating defeat for Male, which later triggered a series of diplomatic debates and actions between New Delhi and Male.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Yameen's tenure, reducing the dependence on India was a major challenge for Maldives as half a century long friendship had merged the two countries on several aspects.

Despite Chinese tourists occupying the spot of main revenue generating entity in Maldivian economy replacing the Indian counterparts, the vast majority of Indian professionals choose to remain in Maldives including a large share of doctors, teachers, and engineers. Realising the professional void the country would face

if such qualified Indian population was forced to exit, Yameen's regime reverted back on their previous idea of not renewing visas for Indian professionals and went ahead in clearing the same. However, during the end of the Yameen regime, Indo-Maldivian relations were on its worst state in its history where both countries were engaged in bilateral diplomatic hostility.

### 2018 Elections and Re-Focus on India

Given these scenarios, the 2018 Maldivian Presidential election was closely watched by many countries through various diplomatic and non-diplomatic channels. According to official sources, the voters' turnout was 89 percent and opposition consensus candidate Ibrahim Solih sealed victory with a share of 58 percent against 42 percent secured by the incumbent President Yameen.

Ibrahim Solih's electoral victory gave a new direction to Maldives and redefining its domestic

as well as foreign policies of the country. At the domestic level, while Maldivian people ousted Yameen from power, former president Gayoom who was on political detention by Yameen regime was freed and Mohammed Nasheed returned to Maldives from his exile as the Maldivian Supreme Court cleared all charges against him. At the foreign policy level, Maldives under the Solih government is re-shifting its allegiances towards India. This shift was clear from the actions of Solih's government especially when the country invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected President. The Indian Prime Minister, waving off all sort of speculations in Indo-Maldivian relations participated in Solih's swearing-in

ceremony and solidified the ties by attending meetings not just with Solih but also with Nasheed and Gayoom resuming friendship with the former pro-Indian Maldivian Presidents.<sup>17</sup>

This act of friendship was immediately followed with the first Maldivian ministerial delegation visit in November 2018 to India

comprising of Maldives Foreign minister Abdulla Shahid, Finance minister Ibrahim Ameer, Economic Development minister Fayyaz Ismail, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed Khaleel and Foreign secretary Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed. As a gesture of removing all irritants created by previous government, Maldivian government recalled the pro-Yameen Maldivian Ambassador to India. India's Foreign Minister Ms Sushma Swaraj during the meeting with the ministerial delegation reiterated that India gives "highest importance to its relationship with the Maldives which is marked by trust, transparency, mutual understanding and sensitivity"<sup>18</sup>. India wholeheartedly welcomed Maldivian efforts to rejoin the Commonwealth and also welcomed Maldives' entry into the Indian Ocean Rim Association as its newest member. During this meeting, the ministerial delegation agreed to hold a consular dialogue and further expand and diversify the bilateral commercial and economic relations.

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Following the delegation's visit, President Ibrahim Solih's first State visit to India from 16-18 December 2018, asserted the importance of India. The Maldivian government led by Solih is on a strong mission to limit the Chinese influence and interference in Maldivian politics and economy. Solih government has openly declared that it will review the document of Free Trade Agreement signed with China by the previous government. During a three day visit to India, several meetings between Solih and various Indian authorities significantly mended the Indo-Maldivian relations which had deteriorated during his predecessor's term. India wholeheartedly welcomed Solih's efforts to mend the ties through a diplomatic gesture of declaring \$1.4 billion<sup>19</sup> economic aid to Maldives and further extended its invitation to cooperate on various economic, developmental and security matters.

### The Way Forward

The Indo-Maldivian relations have undergone a tumultuous pattern in the recent past. However, the revival of the relations between India and Maldives under President Solih cannot be taken for granted as China is still very much part of the broader geopolitics in the region. If India has to enhance its position in the IOR, Maldives should be one of the central pieces of its strategy and hence the country has to focus on developing a comprehensive new 'Look South Policy' in order to counter the challenges not only from China but also from other global players.

Increasing its investment, connectivity, financial aid, military-to-military relations in terms of training and joint exercises, close people to people contact by utilizing the Indian Diaspora in the island nation and closer diplomatic ties apart from relaxing trade barriers in terms of

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tariffs need to be considered strongly in India's future strategy towards Maldives to ensure a stable partnership between the two uninterrupted by external players and factors.

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam is a former Tamil militant group that had become a pro-government paramilitary group and political party. It drew world attention through its failed coup attempt in Maldives.

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