

ISLAND HOPPING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

On his first visit abroad, to New Delhi last week, as the President of the Maldives, [Ibrahim Mohamed Solih](#) appears to have struck the right notes. In India a month after assuming his new responsibility, Mr. [Solih has assured New Delhi that the Maldives is pivoting to the 'India First' policy](#).

The five-year-long tenure of his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, was marked by a serious deterioration in ties with India, as Mr. Yameen steadily took his nation towards authoritarianism and into a close embrace with China.

Mr. Solih's government has adopted a different vision — one anchored in decentralised and people-centric governance. India seems to enjoy a special place in his worldview. He stressed that it is "our closest neighbour". President Ram Nath Kovind reciprocated by tweeting: "India attaches the highest importance to its relationship with Maldives." Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the only head of government present at Mr. Solih's inauguration, on November 17.

The joint statement issued during Mr. Solih's visit reflects a fine balance between the interests of both countries. To help the Maldives address its budget deficit and development challenges, India has worked out a generous [\\$1.4 billion assistance package](#). Its break-up and the period for which it is available have not been revealed yet. However, it is learnt reliably that much of the funding may be utilised for people-friendly projects in four domains: health care, education, water and sanitation.

Besides, India has offered visa facilitation that will allow Maldivians to visit India easily (with reciprocal facilities for Indian visitors to the Maldives); 1,000 "additional" training slots for the next five years; close cooperation on political and diplomatic issues; and support to the Maldives as it seeks to rejoin the Commonwealth and its entry into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The visit resulted in the conclusion of four agreements relating to cooperation for information technology, culture, agri-business, and visa arrangements.

The new government in Male has also given assurances to be fully sensitive to India's security and strategic concerns, in the light of reports that China has gained access to one or more islands for military purposes. On the valid ground that the security interests of both countries are "interlinked", India and the Maldives have agreed to be mindful of "each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region". The two governments now plan "to enhance maritime security" in the Indian Ocean Region. The expectation in Delhi is that the Indian Navy and Coast Guard will now be able to secure better cooperation from the Maldives for coordinated patrolling, aerial surveillance and capacity building.

Besides, intelligence agencies hope to revert to nurturing better collaboration in combating terrorism and other non-traditional security challenges. This is significant, considering that radicalisation is a live issue there. A sizeable number of Maldivian young men are reported to have left to join the Islamic State in Syria.

The trade and investment facet of the bilateral relationship is of a modest nature, given the country's small population. The annual value of bilateral trade is \$200 million. India Inc., therefore, needs to be energised to increase its presence in the Maldivian market, despite the setback suffered by a private Indian firm when its contract was cancelled unceremoniously in December 2012. Mr. Solih did well by participating in a business event, hosted jointly by India's

three apex industry chambers. His message was clear: the Maldives is open for business again.

The deliberations in Delhi took place as China's footprint in South Asia has increased in recent years. There is a growing realisation that, owing to Beijing's strategic objectives, economic capability and assertive diplomacy, it is not feasible for India to supplant China in neighbouring countries. But India has its own advantages, assets and friends. The intention is to leverage them fully, deriving benefit from the neighbours' essential thirst for maintaining balance in their external relations.

The change in the Maldives has been followed by a re-assertion of democratic impulses in Sri Lanka, as symbolised by the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister. India enjoys close relations with Mauritius and the Seychelles. A new grouping of India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and the Seychelles, focussed on maritime security and economic development, looks attainable in the short term.

In devising a smart action plan to implement the SAGAR, or Security and Growth for All in the Region, strategy, that was announced by Mr. Modi in March 2015, New Delhi should accord equal importance to its two key goals: address its neighbours' concerns on security challenges; and harness enticing opportunities for the Blue Economy. Even others such as South Africa, whose President is due to visit India in January next year, and Kenya, much enthused from having hosted recently the first global conference on the sustainable Blue Economy, may be happy to join.

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The government's maternity benefit programme must be implemented better and comply with the Food Security Act

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