

India should tread lightly in the Maldives

President Abdulla Yameen of the Maldives has shown little regard for the world community's calls to roll back the emergency he imposed last week to cling on to power. The "China factor" seems to be a key reason for his bravado at a time when his opponents have been urging India to step in, militarily if required, to shore up the island nation's floundering democratic set-up. China, which has sizeable investments in the Maldives and accounts for more than 70% of the country's foreign debt, has repeatedly warned against any outside intervention and described the political crisis as an internal affair that should be resolved by the stakeholders. Beijing did, however, somewhat modify its stance on Friday by saying it is in the "common interest" of India and China to maintain stability in the Maldives — a tacit acknowledgement of New Delhi's role and influence in the region.

As things stand, the opposition in the Maldives is in no position to take on Mr Yameen, backed as he is by the military and the police force, and it is natural for leaders such as former president Mohamed Nasheed to turn to traditional ally, India. China may have poured millions of dollars into the Maldives, but there is a growing realisation among the polity that its presence isn't exactly benign. Some have even raised India's military intervention in the Maldives in 1988 while seeking action from New Delhi. But the situations are different. Thirty years ago, India had intervened to stop a coup by mercenaries, but the ongoing turmoil has Mr Yameen pitted against other Maldivian politicians and institutions. Therefore, a military operation may not be the ideal way to resolve the crisis and also ensure that democracy, however weak it may currently be, takes deeper roots in the Maldives.

There are some voices suggesting India hasn't done enough, or that it hasn't acted with alacrity. It would be better for India not to act in haste. Things have started moving in New Delhi, as was evident when Mr Yameen's special envoy was informed he needn't bother coming to India till the Maldivian president has addressed the world community's concerns about the undermining of democratic institutions and the judiciary. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump, in their latest phone conversation, made a pointed reference to concerns about the crisis. As the pieces fall into place, the Maldives crisis could be perfect opportunity for India, the US and other players to use the much vaunted Indo-Pacific strategy to find a solution to a regional problem.

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