

Let the chips fall where they may

Dealing with the unfolding political drama in the Maldives, which has undeniable geopolitical implications for New Delhi, requires a great deal of craft, patience and diplomacy. Not force. More importantly, restoring democracy and civil liberties in Male, or anywhere else in the region, should not be our business. It's for the islanders there to do that as they deem fit. And yet, New Delhi must look after its strategic interests in the increasingly chaotic Indian Ocean Region. The success of Indian diplomacy would lie in striking the 'Goldilocks' balance in dealing with Male; neither too hot nor too cold.

Ever since Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom became the President of the island nation in 2013, the country has grown closer to China, and has consistently used the oldest trick in the playbook of small states: playing big neighbours against each other, to get what it wants. In 2012, for instance, it cancelled an Indian firm's contract to expand Male airport and awarded it to a Chinese one, in 2014, fraying nerves in New Delhi. There are also fears — so far only fears — that Male might eventually allow Chinese military presence on its soil, thereby providing China with a strategic military base in the Indian Ocean.

Who is Mohamed Nasheed?

The current events, therefore, have New Delhi worried, and rightly so. The recent statement by the Ministry of External Affairs makes no efforts to conceal India's worries: "We are disturbed by the declaration of a State of Emergency in the Maldives following the refusal of the Government to abide by the unanimous ruling of the full bench of the Supreme Court on 1 February, and also by the suspension of Constitutional rights of the people of Maldives."

However, the fact that New Delhi is in touch with the U.S. and China and also pushing for the United Nations to send a fact-finding mission to the Maldives shows that there is a sober recognition that force is not the way to resolve the Maldivian crisis. This is despite enthusiastic calls by several members of the Indian strategic community to adopt harder measures to resolve the crisis.

First, let's examine India's real stakes in the Maldives before exploring the various options available and their associated challenges. New Delhi's fundamental concern is not the suspension of civil liberties or setback to democracy in the Maldives. It's China: how China would increase its stocks in Male at the expense of India lies at the heart of Indian anxieties about the political impasse in the Maldives. In New Delhi's mind, then, the game is increasingly zero sum, and winning it would require reinstating India's lost glory in the Maldives, something the embattled former President, Mohamed Nasheed, is promising to do.

Let's put India's apprehensions in context. India has of late been anxious about its steadily losing stature in the neighbourhood: its inability to act in the Maldives will only further accentuate this reality. India's carefully constructed identity of being the "successor-state-of-the-British-Raj" strongly informed the early decades of its regional policy. Assertions of India's Raj tradition in the neighbourhood have been resisted by the smaller countries of the region, often without much success. However, the rise of China has fundamentally changed the equation by giving them an opportunity to demand more respect and negotiate better terms of engagement. South Asia traditionally had one hegemon, India; today it has two, India and China. Small states of the region are indeed the winners in this new balance of power game. The emerging discontents of India's regional policy need to be viewed in this historical context.

Drama on the high seas, 30 years ago

These new geopolitical realities also necessitate that New Delhi alters its approach to dealing with the region and appreciates the aspirations of the region's small states, keeping in mind their increased choices. In other words, the sooner India is able to rejig its regional policy to suit the post-hegemonic milieu in South Asia the better it will be able to grapple with the emerging realities therein. In that spirit, then, India should desist from undertaking "civilising missions" to educate its neighbours on civil liberties and democracy. Let the democratic chips in Maldives fall where they may.

There are several reasons why direct/overt military or political intervention in the Maldives to correct the democratic process there is a bad idea and could damage India's interests in the long term. Those who argue that Washington and the western powers expect India to resolve the crisis in the Maldives seem to forget that there is increasing recognition today that humanitarian intervention often leads to more chaos than order. And the crisis in the Maldives is not even humanitarian in nature.

From a purely instrumental point of view, the costs of an Indian intervention gone wrong (which it is likely to) would far outweigh any potential benefits from a successful intervention, even if we hypothetically accept that an intervention might be successful. Given the fact that Mr. Gayoom does enjoy some domestic political support, Indian intervention would certainly make one faction in the country unhappy which would accuse India of undermining its sovereignty. Moreover, if Mr. Gayoom prolongs the emergency and does not restore normalcy in the country, he is likely to lose support domestically. On the other hand, if New Delhi intervenes, he will use it to drum up popular support.

Call to democracy

If so, anything short of a full-fledged intervention that forcibly removes him from power may indeed be counter-productive. But if New Delhi uses force to dethrone him, the question is what next? Is India willing to brave its aftermath, the nature of which is presently unpredictable? Recall how the American calculation about Iraqis stepping up to support democracy once it intervened to dethrone Saddam Hussein went horribly wrong.

Second, an Indian intervention, especially by an overtly Hindu-right wing government, will push the Maldives towards more Islamist politics, something the Gayoom regime will use to its advantage.

If it's the growing relationship between Male and Beijing that New Delhi is concerned about, there is no guarantee that a military or some other overt form of intervention in the Maldives would ensure a rift between China and the Maldives. In fact, it may even have the reverse effect.

Indian intervention could also complicate life for over 25,000 Indian expatriates who live and work in the Maldives. Then there is the legal challenge: an intervention could constitute a clear violation of the UN Charter and international law. Finally, sermons about civil liberties and democracy are a double-edged sword that could easily come back to haunt us.

In short, New Delhi has very little moral, legal and political locus standi to justify an intervention in the Maldives. It's at best an interested party whose best bet is diplomacy and persuasion.

Intervening in what is strictly a domestic political issue of the Maldives would also be in breach of India's traditional approach to dealing with crises in its neighbourhood. The 1971 intervention in the then East Pakistan was primarily the result of a 10-million-heavy refugee burden on India. Both Operation Cactus of 1988 and the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the late 1980s were undertaken when India was explicitly invited to do so. In the early 2000s, when the Sri Lankan government requested India to intervene to help defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, New Delhi

declined the offer. This is not to say that New Delhi has not covertly intervened in the domestic affairs of its neighbours or applied pressure on the smaller ones. The recent Indian involvement in Sri Lanka is an example of the former and India's 2015 blockade against Nepal, the latter. In any case, New Delhi's interventions on invitation as well as its covert interventions have only produced mixed results. Carrying out a military operation in Maldives today, in full public view, would not sit well with this tradition, nor will it achieve India's strategic objectives.

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