

## The game of chicken in the Arabian Sea

The ongoing crisis in the Maldives has acquired a particularly serious dimension over the past week. In that time, several reports have emerged suggesting China may be directly backing Abdulla Yameen's decision to impose—and extend—the emergency in the small island state. These reports suggest that China has implicitly promised support to Yameen in the event that India moves to forcibly change the political status quo there. Several outlets have reported Chinese naval activity in the eastern Indian Ocean earlier this month, ostensibly to signal to India that the People's Republic will not remain a disinterested spectator in the ongoing imbroglio in the Maldives. They suggest a chronology that is deeply disturbing, and potentially of serious consequence to the troubled India-China relationship. Coming, as it does, six months since the end of the Doklam standoff, any potential Chinese show of force in the Indian Ocean also stands to upturn India's position as the pre-eminent power in that maritime space, as well as undo the diplomatic gains from India's resoluteness during that crisis.

This much is known as a fact: Earlier this month, a Chinese naval surface action group (SAG) of three ships entered the eastern Indian Ocean through the Sunda Straits—thousands of nautical miles away from the waters of South Asian littorals—and having made their presence known, exited the area into the South China Sea. One of these ships was a Type 071 transport vessel which is used to land troops for an amphibious assault—of the kind one would need to land Chinese marines in event of an Indian military intervention in the Maldives, for example. The last time this Yuzhao-class ship made its presence known in the waters of the Indian Ocean was in early 2014, again entering those waters through the Sunda Straits. The 2014 People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) exercise caused an international furore, with a US government report noting that the SAG was meant to signal to India that China could, at will, enter and exit a maritime theatre long considered its exclusive preserve. Notably, since then, China has desisted from deploying the amphibian in operational exercises in the eastern Indian Ocean.

The question then is about the timing and intent of the SAG deployment this time around. To wit, was this simply a pre-planned PLAN exercise, as some have suggested? Or was it related to the ongoing crisis in the Maldives? While there is no definitive way of answering this question, several facts suggest that this was indeed the latter. To begin with, the timing: it is quite possible that Yameen's decision to impose the emergency in the Maldives was based on his impression that the tides were not favourable to him, and that the Mohamed Nasheed-led opposition was about to depose him, potentially with Indian support (do recall that the Maldives has been in New Delhi's radar since Yameen ramrodded a China-Maldives free trade agreement through the parliament a few months ago). In that case, it is likely that he would have consulted Beijing on the future course of action. In turn, China may have deduced that the opportune moment for an Indian intervention in the Maldives—following the Operation Cactus playbook of 1988—would have been right around the time Yameen would set his counter-plan into motion. In order to stall an Operation Cactus redux, Beijing would have had to signal India that it has the muscle to push Indian forces out of the Maldives if it so chooses.

The alternative—that the SAG deployment earlier this month was a benign exercise—does not hold water, for the simple fact that absent any potential Indian show of force in the region, Beijing does not have the appetite to provoke it months after the Doklam standoff. Between the US President Donald Trump's increasingly bellicose stance towards China—witness the new US military strategy that bluntly describes China as a military threat—and Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitious international outreach to hard-sell the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese strategic calculus would suggest that Beijing would overtly signal its military might only when its immediate interests are directly threatened. In case of Yameen's Maldives, China had the right incentive to do so.

But why would China choose to signal that it is not averse to a power-play with India over the Maldives from thousands of miles away? Would it not have been more effective for it to, say, directly dock a flotilla off the coast of Maldives? Again, the answer comes from studying Chinese naval behaviour over the past few years carefully. China has pioneered what Western experts call “grey zone coercion”: a strategy by which China seeks to meet its strategic objective without crossing its adversary’s threshold for conventional military retaliation. By choosing to message its resolve to India from a distance, Beijing ensured that India would not be provoked militarily and yet be compelled to take into account the strategic signal emanating from the east.

What then are India’s options? First, New Delhi must continue to keep up a robust presence in the Arabian Sea, to let Beijing know that regardless of the PLAN’s show of strength, India is unprepared to cede its primacy in its maritime neighbourhood. The Indian Navy must also be allowed to expand its presence operations in the South China Sea, long considered a Chinese preserve. China’s vulnerabilities in its near-seas must be taken advantage of by Indian naval planners. To counter PLAN power-projection in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy would need to raise the tempo of operations in littoral-South-East Asia, where Beijing cannot prove a territorial violation and yet feel the pinch of a perceived violation in its sphere of maritime influence.

Most importantly, India must have an alternative plan ready for the Maldives, just in case naval posturing does not beget an optimal solution. This does not have to involve boots on the ground. The Indian Navy must be prepared for a sustained presence around the island state, even as New Delhi ratchets up the diplomatic heat to resolve the political impasse. In the game of brinkmanship afoot in the Indian Ocean littorals, India must not be the first one to blink.

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