

MALDIVES PARLIAMENT DEBATES DEFENCE DEAL WITH INDIA

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External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with his Maldivian counterpart Abdulla Shahid. PTI

A day after Male and New Delhi signed an agreement to jointly develop the Maldives National Defence Force Coast Guard Harbour, Maldives's Parliament, 'the People's Majlis', took up an emergency motion, demanding greater transparency on the bilateral pact.

Following the signing of the agreement on Sunday, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who was in Male this weekend, tweeted: "Glad to sign with Defence Minister @MariyaDidi the UTF Harbour Project agreement. Will strengthen Maldivian Coast Guard capability and facilitate regional HADR efforts. Partners in development, partners in security."

On Monday, Ahmed Shiyam, an MP from the Opposition Progressive Party of Maldives submitted an emergency motion in the House, objecting to the signing of the pact, linked to the "independence and sovereignty" of the Maldives, without the approval of Parliament, Male-based media reported. A total of 51 legislators in the 87-member House voted in favour of a debate on the motion.

Maldivian Defence Minister Mariya Didi said the project was "vital" to the effective functioning of the Maldivian Coast Guard. "Given our expansive maritime territory, the need to enhance local coast guard capabilities cannot be overstated," she told *The Hindu* from Male, explaining why the government is "elated" that the project is "finally under way". "This dockyard and harbour will, in time, afford us the opportunity to protect our maritime interests on our own thereby enhancing our sovereignty," she said.

The harbour development agreement, effectively a defence pact, was signed following a request from the government of Maldives — since former President Abdulla Yameen's term in 2013 — for Indian assistance to enhance the capability of the Defence Forces, according to a Joint press statement issued by the two governments on Sunday. Subsequently, Male made requests in 2015 and 2016.

Denying that the Yameen administration had sealed any agreement then, Dunya Maumoon, Foreign Minister in his government, said: "We had discussions at that time but did not get into any agreement. The Maldives values strong and warm ties with India. But having warm ties is not equal to having boots on the ground," she told *The Hindu*.

Concerns over "Indian military presence" were flagged in 2018 too, when the Yameen government asked India to take back two helicopters it had gifted, with a crew and support staff, causing a major strain in bilateral ties. Following the September 2018 defeat of the Yameen administration, which was known for its China tilt, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's government has been pursuing an "India first" policy.

However, not all in the ruling coalition agree with the government's current foreign policy. During Monday's debate in Parliament, government MP Ali Hussain said Male should avoid seeking assistance on military matters from any big power. "Whether it is India, China or the U.S., their agreements here are bound to have conflicting interests. We should not end up in a situation where we have to choose one partner over another, we should not become part of a proxy

[geopolitical] war,” he told *The Hindu* .

Last year, New Delhi welcomed the Maldives’s decision to sign a military agreement with the U.S.

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