

INDIA-MALDIVES ROW FRAMES THE NEED FOR INDIA'S LONG NEGLECTED MARINE DOCTRINE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The incipient tensions between India and its tiny neighbour, Maldives, simmering for over a decade, finally came to a head when three junior ministers of the island nation's government made crude and disparaging remarks on social media about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Lakshadweep islands. Once New Delhi conveyed its displeasure over this gross impropriety, the Maldivian government distanced itself from the remarks, and President Mohamed Muizzu "suspended" the errant ministers before departing for his maiden visit to Beijing.

While it may be tempting to dismiss this contretemps as a "storm in a teacup," there are a few dimensions to this episode, with implications that go beyond the transgressions of juvenile politicians. They could serve as lessons for the future.

First, the strategic dimension. The Maldives archipelago — consisting of 27 coral atolls dispersed north-to-south over 900 km of the southern Indian Ocean, with an exclusive economic zone of nearly a million square km — is an important element in India's maritime security matrix. While the Indian Navy (IN) has taken cognisance of this in formulating its doctrine and deployments, our decision-makers have continued to suffer from a "continental fixation", and in the absence of a national security strategy, our maritime initiatives have remained random and sporadic.

As far back as 1945, India's "[oracle](#) of maritime wisdom," K M Panikkar had pronounced that "an exclusively land-based defence policy for India will, in future, be nothing short of blindness... India's freedom will hardly be worth a day's purchase if Indian interests in the Indian Ocean are not defended." He had accurately predicted: "That China intends to embark on a policy of large-scale naval expansion is clear enough... with her bases extending as far south as Hainan, China will be in an advantageous position..." It also bears recalling that the British had maintained a Royal Air Force base on Maldives' Gan Island since 1942, which they vacated with reluctance only in 1976 and then moved 200 miles south to their Indian Ocean territory of Diego Garcia.

Second, our diplomatic approach to Maldives (and perhaps other neighbours) needs scrutiny. Politics in Muslim-majority Maldives has been influenced, as much by hyper-nationalism and religious fervour, as by the India-China rivalry. Alarms should have rung in the MEA as early as 2011 when the relationship actually started fraying. A blunt signal was the peremptory cancellation of a contract to develop Male's international airport awarded to Indian conglomerate GMR, driven ostensibly by Opposition charges of "compromise of national sovereignty". But some questions remain unanswered: Did New [Delhi](#) receive a warning of emerging hostility from its Male representatives? If so, was anything done to stem the slide in relations?

While China's politico-economic seduction, coupled with Pakistan's religious incitement — using the "Islamic card" — has no doubt played an important role in alienating Maldives, there is room for introspection on India's part too. Given its population of just half a million, Maldives is Asia's smallest country and hyper-sensitivity to "big-brotherly" attitudes is to be expected. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Indian diplomats often arouse resentment, especially in neighbourhood capitals, by their condescending attitudes, over-emphasis on India's cultural dominance and projecting a "viceroy's" rather than envoy's image. When coupled with India's ongoing domestic

churn, wherein communal “hate speeches” are often seen going unchecked, the overall picture for neighbours could not be an attractive one.

Third, as India and China vie for influence in the Indo-Pacific, we need to shift exclusive focus from border disputes to the larger geopolitical competition. In the Indian Ocean Region China suffers from the “tyranny of distance.” For example, Male is about 6,000 km from the nearest Chinese port of Hainan and only 700 km from Kochi. To reach Male a ship, at 15 knots, would take just a day and a half from Kochi and more than 10 days from Hainan.

The distinct advantages of having a friendly neighbour next-door should have become obvious to Maldivians during the 1988 abortive “coup d’etat”, the 2004 tsunami, and the 2014 drinking-water crisis, when the Indian Navy was the “first responder” in each case. One is confident that India’s good-neighbourly attitude will endure, regardless of transient diplomatic hiccups.

However, China being the world’s largest trading nation, has its own compulsions. Its economy and industry, being overwhelmingly dependent on the uninterrupted passage of seaborne trade, have rendered the country’s Indian Ocean sea lanes akin to a “jugular vein,” to be protected at all costs. It is to this end that Beijing has developed potential maritime footholds in the Indian Ocean Region, like Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, and leased a military/naval base in Djibouti. Herein lies the imperative of checkmating India to enlist Maldives as an IOR ally.

As a final corollary to the Maldives episode, one would urge better exploitation of the potential of maritime diplomacy – not as a substitute, but as a vital instrument of conventional diplomacy. The “diplomatic role” is the second of four roles assigned by the Maritime Doctrine to the Indian Navy, its larger purpose being, “to favourably shape the maritime environment in furtherance of national interests, in consonance with the foreign policy and national security objectives.”

For decades, the Indian Navy would receive urgent requests from maritime neighbours, for training, naval presence, advisers and hardware. Very often, we had to disappoint them, due to bureaucratic impediments, and lack of funding. Finally, in 2005-06, the Naval HQ, on its own, created an organisation headed by a two-star admiral devoted to foreign cooperation. Patrol boats, aircraft and helicopters, withdrawn from the navy’s own inventory, were transferred to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar and Maldives. This maritime diplomacy has had long-lasting and salutary consequences.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) had, in 2015, coined the slogan, “security and growth for all in the region,” whose acronym SAGAR has become a foreign-policy catchphrase, representing broad regional maritime cooperation. However, there is no document amplifying the vision underpinning SAGAR. Perhaps, it is time to flesh out SAGAR as a new and comprehensive maritime doctrine that will lend direction and purpose to regional diplomacy — both maritime and conventional.

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