

ENRICHING THE DEFENCE CONTOURS OF INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS

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Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh's visit to the archipelagic state of the Maldives on 1–3 May 2023, on the invitation of his Maldivian counterpart, Mariya Didi, has strengthened the countries' long-standing ties and expanded defence cooperation. The highlight of the RM's visit was the gifting of two 'Made in India' naval platforms to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF).¹

Due to its geographic proximity, Maldives is one of India's most important maritime neighbours. In 1976, both countries signed a maritime boundary agreement. India provided assistance to counter the coup against the then Maldivian government in 1988, and barring the brief period when strong anti-Indian sentiments rose under the administration of Abdulla Yameen Abul Gayoom from 2013 to 2018, overall bilateral relations, particularly those in defence and security, have improved.

India is a resident power in the Indian Ocean and is working towards maintaining a secure and peaceful IOR and by extension, in the larger Indo-Pacific. The need to maintain a free, inclusive and open Indo-Pacific aligns with India's quest to be viewed as a preferred security partner in the region and a net security provider to its immediate maritime neighbourhood. This is echoed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) policy which advocates "a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region" and deepening "economic and security cooperation" with maritime neighbours and island states.² The Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) was formulated to provide a forum for the navies of the littoral states to work towards interoperability in meeting security and maritime-related challenges.³ The sentiment was further reiterated at the Shangri-La Dialogue of 2018 in Singapore, where the Prime Minister proposed the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).⁴ Over time, India has formally promulgated its "Neighbourhood First" policy for its immediate neighbours in the sub-continent.⁵

Despite the close relationship between India and Maldives, China, one of the major overseas investors in Maldives, gained favours with the earlier Abdulla Yameen government whose tenure lasted from 2013 to 2018. The \$800 million deal for developing the main international airport of the island chain in Male was awarded to the Chinese company Beijing Urban Construction Group over the Indian company GMR.⁶ This was one of several instances of the government's pro-China leanings. Such instances have fuelled the Chinese ambition of deepening its influence on securing the strategic sea lanes of commerce passing through the IOR to further the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Gayoom government's tenure saw a massive rise in Chinese economic and infrastructural investments in various sectors of the country, amounting to around \$1.4 billion debt by 2020.⁷

India has been deeply involved in numerous capacity-development and capability-enhancement endeavours for the defence and security infrastructure in Maldives. Former defence minister A.K Anthony, on his visit to Maldives in 2009, noted that "the defence and security of both our countries are intertwined."⁸ The Indian Navy has worked with Maldives to enhance capability development and capacity building exercises, train personnel, assist in infrastructure building and transfer equipment. This reiterates India's role as a net security provider in the region. The Indian government reassessed its diplomatic endeavours with key Indian Ocean island nations,

keeping in mind their access to the region.⁹

In 2006, the Indian Navy gifted the CGS Huravee to the MNDF for coastal surveillance and for combating transnational crimes. This ship was repaired in 2021. The recent visit by the Raksha Mantri in May 2023 also witnessed India handing over a replacement ship for the CGS Huravee, a Trinkat-class patrol vessel. The first version of this ship was gifted to the Maldivian Coast Guard in 2006 and it was instrumental for the purpose of coastal surveillance, and for combatting drug trafficking and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.

India needed to strengthen its maritime presence and strategic choke points, for which initiatives like Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) were developed for better coordination in maritime affairs. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks in 2008 led to the creation of the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) by the Indian Navy in 2014, to process the non-military information collected from the Indian coastlines and island territories. This led to the subsequent development of the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Gurugram, India, the hosting of International Liaison Officers (ILOs) from 12 countries, with Maldives being one of them. Maldives also has a liaison officer who is posted in the IFC-IOR, Gurugram. The activities of the IFC-IOR aim to

“... develop a common maritime understanding to counter non-traditional maritime security threats such as piracy and armed robbery, human and contraband trafficking, Illegal Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, arms running, poaching, maritime terrorism, etc with a special focus on the Western Indian Ocean.”¹⁰

During the term of Abdulla Yameen, India and Maldives signed a comprehensive action plan to consolidate their defence partnerships on 12 April 2016. The defence plan aimed to enhance defence cooperation between the two countries, focusing on areas such as joint exercises, maritime security, and information sharing, to strengthen their strategic partnership and promote regional stability. President Yameen remarked that India was the most important friend of the island state, even amidst his administration's inclination to partner with China on key infrastructural development projects.¹¹

Both countries agreed to conduct regular bilateral defence cooperation dialogues (DCD) at the Defence Secretary level.¹² The subsequent defence cooperation dialogues took place in 2017, 2022, with the fourth edition concluding in March 2023 in Male. The discussions at the fourth dialogue centred on the future course of bilateral defence relations. Joint exercises like the 'Ekuverin' are regularly conducted between the militaries of both states, with the last edition being held in 2021. Some of the other initiatives by India and Maldives pertain to white shipping agreements and coastal surveillance radar systems.¹³ Aside from this, India has also played a pivotal role in training personnel of the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), and other military to military activities.

India has also trained MNDF personnel for UN peace-keeping operation at CUNPK. The Indian Navy has deployed Marine Commando teams to Maldives and provided MNDF with air assets for air surveillance, MEDEVAC, SAR, Helo-borne vertical insertion capability. Key projects in the defence sector which included the Composite Training Centre (CTC) for MNDF, Coastal Radar System (CRS) and construction of new Ministry of Defence Headquarters were jointly inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his State Visit to Maldives in June 2019 with President Solih. During the August 2022 visit of President Solih to India, supply of a replacement ship for the earlier provided ship-CGS Huravee to MNDF, Supply of the second Landing Craft Assault (LCA) to MNDF and gifting of 24 utility vehicles to MNDF was announced.¹⁴

Furthermore, India and Maldives also work alongside Sri Lanka on common maritime security concerns in the region. This has made way for the biennial trilateral security dialogue at the National Security Advisory (NSA) level between the three countries, which have been held in sporadic intervals since 2011, with the latest one concluding in 2021. The trilateral dialogue has now been rebranded as the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), a new mini-lateral organisation to improve security cooperation with the island and coastal states in the Indian Ocean. The group adopted an agenda of five pillars in March 2022. These included the following: maritime safety and security; countering terrorism and radicalisation; combating trafficking and transnational organised crime; cyber security, and protection of critical infrastructure and technology; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.¹⁵

In 2 August 2022, Maldivian President Solih paid an official visit to India, wherein he reiterated Maldives' India First policy and expressed hope to work on common security issues in the region in a bilateral manner.¹⁶ The current government's foreign policy has made the shift to being India-oriented and has referred to India as a "reliable ally to the Maldives, through thick and thin."¹⁷ Moreover, India has also extended Lines of Credit (LoC) to Maldives at different times to fund various civilian, infrastructural and defence projects. The Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) Naval Base is a recent example of joint work on developing defence platforms and infrastructure to promote regional security and growth. Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh also participated in laying the foundation stone of the Maldives Coast Guard Ekatha Harbour at Sifavaru in the UTF atoll.¹⁸ This will enhance the Maldivian Coast Guard's capability in repairing and maintaining naval vessels and training programs.

Aside from military-to-military cooperation and assistance, India has actively assisted Maldives in several HADR activities such as post-tsunami assistance, Operation Neer in 2014 to provide relief during the drinking water crisis and Operation Sanjeevani to provide 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines to Maldives. In the recent Operation Vaccine Maitri, India transported Covid-19 vaccines to many countries around the world. Maldives and Bhutan were among the first countries to receive it in January 2021.¹⁹

The close relations between India and Maldives have traversed beyond the constructs of defence and hard security. In addition to working on capacity building and capability enhancement initiatives, the two countries have also worked on areas such as climate resilience, disaster risk mitigation, and transmission interconnections for renewable power transfer under the One Sun, One World and One Grid (OSOWOG) initiative.²⁰ Maldives is also a participant in the India-led Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), which aims to coordinate work to develop resilience among small-island states climate crisis.

With the coming to power of the Ibrahim Mohamed Solih government in 2018, the anti-India sentiments of the earlier regime seem to have abetted. With the upcoming Maldivian presidential elections in September 2023, there is widespread speculation in the diplomatic community about the continued goodwill among the two states. The Maldivian administration has maintained time and again that the 'India Out' campaign itself posed a threat to the nation's security as it runs the risk on endangering the mutually cooperative atmosphere in the region. The maintenance of a non-partisan and stable relationship between the two countries propels them towards a more sustainable and secure IOR. The complementarity between India's Neighbourhood First policy and the current Maldivian government's 'India First' policy is a concrete example of their continued friendship.

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