

FRIENDS & NEIGHBOURS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

The signing of a defence agreement between the Maldives and the United States earlier this month showed how geopolitical tensions are manifesting themselves in several strategic spaces, and how Delhi's own responses have changed in the new environment. The "Framework for U.S. Department of Defence-Maldives Ministry of Defence and Security Relationship" agreement is emblematic. In 2013, a year after Maldivian Democratic Party leader Mohammed Nasheed had been ousted, a US proposal for a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Indian Ocean nation met with stiff opposition in Delhi. The plan was shelved, but Delhi, despite the heightened awareness of China's growing influence in its neighbourhood, was not enthused by the Obama "pivot to Asia". Not any more.

Delhi has made it clear that the broad framework agreement, which includes a security dialogue and "sets forth both countries' intent to deepen engagement and co-operation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean", is "in line" with India's overall interests and regional stability. After watching Male in a tight embrace with Beijing under the 2014-18 Abdulla Yameen government, Delhi's response is one of quiet relief. It has also ramped up its bilateral engagement.

Last month, India committed to providing \$250 million in budgetary support to the Maldives to help it tide over the [pandemic](#)-induced economic crisis that has crippled tourism. Delhi is also providing a \$400 m line of credit for the construction of what is billed as the single-argest infrastructure project in the Maldives, the Greater Male Connectivity project, which aims to provide streamlined connectivity between Male and three other islands. Maldives is also the only neighbouring country with whom India has a travel bubble. Most significant is the cargo ferry service between the two countries inaugurated earlier this week. Three years ago, the Maldives government had entered into a Free Trade Agreement with China in response to European trade sanctions against the authoritarian Yameen government. But the successor government of President Ibrahim Solih decided not to bring in the enabling legislation because it was heavily loaded against the import dependent economy. There is a lesson in this for Delhi: For the cargo service to be useful to both sides, India must take care to ensure that it is not perceived to be dumping goods on that country. There is bound to be asymmetry, but if that is what making friends of neighbours entails, so be it.

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