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India and the Maldives strengthen military ties

Following his election on November 17, Maldives President Ibrahim Solih, has rapidly moved to strengthen political and military relations with India. This process was further highlighted by last month's week-long visit to India by Defence Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi, who was accompanied by Chief of Maldivian Defence Force, Major-General Abdulla Shamaal, and other senior officers.

Chinese influence in the Maldives had greatly expanded under former President Abdulla Yameen. These relations were opposed by India, which considers the region to be its backyard, and the US, in line with its preparations for war against China. Last year Washington and New Delhi initiated a regime-change operation to elevate the pro-US Solih into the presidency.

Indian Prime Minister Modi attended Solih's swearing-in ceremony in November. A joint statement was signed which declared the "importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region.

During last month's visit, Maldivian Defence Minister Didi met with her Indian counterpart Nirmala Sitharaman, as well as top Indian military officers.

Both countries agreed to expand maritime security cooperation and to complete the previously stalled Coastal Radar Surveillance System (CSRR) in the Maldives. An Indian defence ministry statement said the talks were "substantive," and "further strengthened bilateral defence cooperation." The two countries would "continue their traditionally close cooperation on issues of maritime security [and] counter-terrorism."

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An India-Maldives Defence Cooperation Dialogue was also held during Didi's visit. Sitharaman reiterated New Delhi's commitment to the "capacity building" and "training requirements" of the Maldivian defence forces. Didi later told the media that the two countries discussed ways of establishing a "collaborative structure" for information sharing and a "fusion mechanism."

During his administration, former President Yameen relied on the support of the Maldivian military to safeguard his rule, attack democratic rights and suppress the political opposition. Last February, however, the Maldivian Supreme Court, in an attempt to undermine Yameen and bring a pro-Indian, pro-western administration to power, issued several highly unfavourable decisions against Yameen.

The court ordered the immediate release of opposition leader and former President Mohamed Nasheed and the dropping of eight convictions against other political leaders. Yameen responded by declaring a state of emergency and had Supreme Court Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and another judge arrested. Under this pressure, the remaining three Supreme Court judges annulled its previous rulings.

As tensions increased the pro-US Nasheed called on New Delhi to invade the Maldives, declaring the country was becoming a Chinese colony. The Indian media reported that although New Delhi had made some military preparations it would not do so, as it was concerned about a possible Chinese response to any "external" intervention in Maldivian internal affairs.

India, however, is now taking advantage of the new regime in the Maldives to further expand its geo-strategic and military influence in the region. That is the meaning of its pledge to assist in the "training" and "capacity building" of the Maldivian security forces. The Press Trust of India reported that the two countries agreed to remain mindful about the stability of the Indian Ocean region and not allow their territories "to be used for any activity that is hostile to each other's interest." This was a clear jab against China.

Didi later claimed that her government did not "talk about our relations with other countries"—i.e., China and Pakistan. "India respects our sovereignty," she said, adding, "We are very comfortable [with] having India as our very close friend because they always came to our rescue—[be it] in 1988, the 2004 tsunami or the recent water crisis."

In 1988, Maldivian President Abdul Gayoom appealed for Indian military assistance to help to defeat a coup d'état by a group of Sri Lanka Tamil mercenaries who attempted to install Maldivian businessman Abdulla Luthufi as the country's leader. Indian Prime

Minister Rajiv Gandhi immediately responded to Gayoom's call and, under the codename Operation Cactus, dispatched 1,600 troops within nine hours to defeat the coup.

India and the Maldives will now intensify their military ties. The 2016 defence cooperation Action Plan between the two countries, which was halted under Yameen, will be revived. A top priority will be India's "partnering" with the Maldives to build coast guard infrastructure at the Uthuru Thila Falhu atoll, one of the joint defence projects in the Action Plan. In addition, the Maldives will allow New Delhi to have access to facilities for training, surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone and so-called Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.

The Maldives is strategically located in the southwest tip of India, just above key sea-lanes from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia, South East Asia and Australia. These routes, which provide China, Japan, South Korea and India with access to Middle Eastern oil, are a focal point for rivalry between the US and India on one side and China on the other.

Each year more than 100,000 ships carrying oil, minerals and manufactured goods pass through the international shipping lanes in the northern Indian Ocean. Diego Garcia, the US's principal Indian Ocean military base, lies 1,300 kilometres south of Male, the Maldivian capital.

The recent flurry of high-level political and military meetings since Solih became president reveals how Delhi, with US backing, has quickly moved to establish a pro-Indian government in the Maldives. Under the intensifying geo-political tensions between the US and China, even the nominal independence of underdeveloped nations is a thing in the past.