

Rethinking India-Maldives Relations in the 21st Century

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Abstract

One of the littoral states of India is Maldives, located in the south western tip of India. A small island country in South Asia, Maldives's relations with India have been cordial and on numerous occasions India as a neighbouring country had assisted Maldives in its trajectory to economic development, welfare and security. However Maldives has strategic significance for India since it is situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean and several internal as well as external factors which are affecting Maldives has an adverse implication on India. Such as the political turmoil which happened from 2008 to 2012 and growing influence of China in the island nation. The article sets to analyse the relationship between India and Maldives from 1968 onwards when Maldives became a republic till contemporary times with special emphasis on the changing foreign policy approaches of both the countries in the last decade. Also the article examines the concerns which India has for Maldives as neighbouring country.

Key words: Foreign Policy; Indian Ocean Region; Security; Terrorism;

Introduction:

India is the world's largest democracy and the second most populous country in the world and is one of the fastest growing economies competing with economic giants like the USA and China. In geographic size, population and economy India is undoubtedly a dominant country in South Asia. India had strong geographical, historical and cultural linkages with its neighbouring countries. Despite India's increasing politico-economic power in the region, it has maintained a foreign policy to have cordial and friendly relations with its smaller

neighbours and continue to support with different bilateral treaties which believes in mutual cooperation. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) briefing on India-Maldives Relations: 'India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity and enjoy close, cordial and multi dimensional relations' (GOI 2014). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first foreign policy message was to rebuild neighbourhood relations in the South Asian region. In his oath taking ceremony as a Prime Minister of India, on May 26, 2014 he invited all the heads of the government of the South Asian Association for Regional

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Cooperation (SAARC) countries to participate (Muni 2015). Anand Kumar (2016: 50) is of the opinion that it is important to understand what India's interest in regard to Maldives is. 'First, India is interested in the political stability in the neighbourhood, and the Maldives is no exception. Second, India would like to prevent the Maldives from falling under the influence of any forces (state or non-state) that are inimical to its security interests. This can also change security environment in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Third, a large number of Indians work in the Maldives and India is interested in their safety and security. Finally, India would like the investments of its companies in the Maldives to be secure.'

The article explores the relationship which India has with its littoral state Maldives. Unlike other neighbouring countries of India with whom it shares a territorial border, in case of Maldives and Sri Lanka they share the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its diplomatic relations and security concerns differ from other countries. The first section will explore the ties which India had with Maldives in the recent past and also provides a brief background of the island nation. The second section of the article will make an in depth analysis of the security concerns which India has for Maldives and also will make critical understanding of the relationship both the countries share in contemporary times.

India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the

Maldives after it gained independence in 1965. In 1974, for the first time the Prime Minister Mr. Ahmed Zaki of Maldives made an official visit to India and thereafter there have been frequent bilateral visits between the two countries. Besides bilateral trade with Maldives, a comparatively large population of Indians stay in Maldives and work in various professions from doctors, nurses, engineers, teachers, workers etc. Indians are the second largest expatriate community in the Maldives with approximate strength of around 26,000 (Manoharan 2014). In 1986, India agreed to establish and finance entirely a medical complex in the capital of Male (Poplin 2014: 213). At an estimated cost of 425 million rupees (US \$13.1 million) the 200-bed Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital was finished in 1995. During the initial years, India provided doctors/paramedics and nurses for running the hospital and the hospital continues to serve the people of Maldives. In 2011, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Male and signed an MoU to carry out major renovation in the hospital. Other institutions assisted by India were Faculty of Engineering Technology, Technology Adoption Programme in Education Sector in Maldives and Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Studies (Manoharan 2014).

According to David Brewster (2014: 57), 'Maldives is a potential source of security threats to India: its sparse population and numerous uninhabited islands make it a possible haven for

terrorists, pirates and smugglers and there are fears that its Muslim population could become radicalized.' In one of the major incidents in 1988 India militarily intervened at the request of the then President of Maldives to prevent an attempted coup organised by a Maldivian businessman assisted by 80-200 mercenaries from the Sri Lankan Tamil insurgent group, the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). The Indian Air Force airlifted some 300 paratroops from Agra to Male, landing on the nearby island of Hulhule which was still under the control of Maldivian security services and in addition the Indian troops were also transported by air and by sea from Cochin and Indian Air Force Mirages were deployed over Male as a show of force (Brewster 2014: 58). Within a few hours the Indian troops were successful in capturing the insurgents and took control of the situation. Almost 150 Indian troops remained in the island for a year after the attempted coup.

In the past, Maldives as a small country was completely unnoticed to the rest of the world but in recent times it has witnessed several political turmoil and crisis which has brought Maldivian politics in the international headlines. India, as neighbouring country has adopted a policy of non-interference and according to former Indian foreign secretary Kapil Sibal. 'It is for them (Maldivian parties) to sort it out internally. India's interest lie in ensuring the region does not become a playground for international rivalries. The second major

task is to ensure Islamic fundamentalists do not establish a base in the islands and threaten peninsular India' (Majumdar 2015: 169). However, India would still prefer that there is political stability in Maldives.

Maldives: A Brief Background

In South Asia, Maldives is one of the smallest countries of the region. However, one cannot underestimate Maldives due to its size; it has a crucial role to play in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) for bringing about political stability in the region. Moreover, Maldives is situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean, which is also the busiest sea route for commercial purposes. Maldives a small island country has an estimated population of 341,200 (ADB 2015: 10). The country was a British protectorate from 1887 to 1965 unlike its neighbouring countries like India and Sri Lanka who were British colonies. Maldives is a small island republic consisting of more than 1200 islands, stretching over 800 kilometres of the Indian Ocean. Maldives is located approximately 450 miles in the south western tip of India. The capital city, Male, is home to one-third of the people with a total land area of less than 2 square kilometres (ADB 2015: 10). The 26 natural atolls that make up Maldives are grouped for purposes of administration into 20 administrative atolls, with Male, the nation's capital island, constituting an additional administrative unit (Shaljan 2004: 1835). Maldives is culturally, religiously and linguistically a

homogeneous society. The national language of Maldives is *Dhivehi*, belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, being most closely related to Sinhala, spoken in Sri Lanka. The state religion is Islam and the majority population are Sunni Muslims. On the whole the Maldivian society is quite modern in terms of gender equality; women are found in all professions, though the country provides only limited opportunities (Ghosh 2014: 209). The Maldivian women, in comparison to other developing countries, enjoy a higher social status and greater social freedom.

Due to its small territorial size, the country has limited resources and most of the essential commodities from food, building construction raw materials to technical items, are imported from other countries. Maldives is also vulnerable to natural disasters, as the extremely low elevation of its islands (averaging about 1.5 meters above mean sea level) increases its susceptibility to tsunamis and effects of climate change (ADB 2015: 13). Traditionally fishing was the main occupation of the people of Maldives. By 1972 the tourism industry had started and the government had converted many of the unused islands into luxurious resorts in order to attract tourist. The tourism industry has flourished throughout the years and tourist from all across the world come to visit the island country. Since Maldives have only fishing and tourism industry to boost its economy, a large import of essential commodities is necessary for survival of the country.

Hence its dependence on other countries for import of commodities, financial aid and technical assistance is immense. Despite the daunting challenges of geography and a widely dispersed population, the Maldives has recorded significantly high growth in the last decades: real GDP growth averaged about 7.4 per cent per year during 1986–2014 due to tourism industry (ADB 2015: 16).

Maldives became a republic when the last sultan was deposed in 1968 and Ibrahim Nasir became President. The Majlis (the Parliament) is elected every five years and nominates the President; if the nominee fails to get approved in the popular vote the Majlis selects another nominee (Maloney 1976: 658). There were no political parties till 2005. The parliament unanimously approved a resolution to allow political parties to seek recognition and contest elections, ending the no-party system in Maldives. Thereafter two elections were held as per the 2008 Constitution. From 1978 to 2008, for three decades, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, won six consecutive elections and he went on to become the longest serving President in Asia. Under his leadership, tourism industry expanded and made the Maldives the most prosperous country in South Asia. However, his political leadership was in many ways autocratic and dictatorial in nature and he tried to suppress voices of dissent or any political opponents. He was also accused of corruption and human rights abuses. In 2008, Mohamed Nasheed from Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) won the

country's first democratic elections by 54 per cent of votes and was successful able to ouster Gayoom. Nasheed introduced various political reforms but he faced several challenges, since the majority of the Majlis (Parliament) continued to be under the control and influence of the former President, Gayoom. In February 2012, some members of the police and army revolted against Nasheed, resulting in his resignation. He alleged that he was forced to resign at gunpoint by a group of police officers who were loyalists of Mr. Gayoom. India's External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid noted: 'We are deeply disappointed and distressed that this should have happened. Our understanding of the democratic system is that even if there are imperfections in the election system, those imperfections need to be addressed in a manner which is not destructive of the very process of elections' (Manoharan 2014). But India believes in non-interference of the internal affairs of other countries and hence it did not intervene when there was political instability going on in Maldives during 2008-2012.

In 2013 elections, Mr. Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom won the Presidential elections and he is a half-brother of Mr. Gayoom. Mr. Yameen, an economist and a candidate of Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), received 51.39 per cent of the votes over opposition leader and former president Mohammed Nasheed who garnered 48.61 per cent of the votes. In recent times Mr. Yameen has been criticised from opposition leaders for

the imprisonment of political figures such as former president Mohamed Nasheed and former Minister of Defence Mohamed Nazim. He has been accused of framing and imprisoning them for political purposes, however Mr. Yameen has denied such allegations.

Foreign Policy of Maldives:

The foreign policy of Maldives is based on friendship and co-operation with all countries on the basis of 'mutual respect for independence, sovereignty and integrity, in the spirit of peaceful co-existence' (Grover 2000: 61). During Cold War, Maldives did not make alliances with either of the blocs even though Britain had a military base in the Gan Island, instead it joined the non-aligned movement (NAM) in 1977. In the same year Maldives also started active participation in the United Nations and then President was appointed as the first permanent representative of his country. Maldives is one of the founding members of SAARC and it has successfully hosted two SAARC meetings. Maldives became a member of the Commonwealth of Nations on 9th July 1982 and had voluntarily associated itself to the organisation since it was once a British protectorate until 1965. Maldives has viewed the organisation as a platform for greater good and has proactively participated in all Commonwealth initiatives. But in 2016, Maldives left the Commonwealth, claiming it was 'unfairly and unjustly' treated by the global body that was due to consider sanctions -

including suspension - against the nation after its 'lack of progress' on a raft of democratic reforms (The Telegraph 2016). After the ouster of former President Nasheed in 2012 at gunpoint, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) had been monitoring the political progress of Maldives and has accused the present government of jailing most senior members of the main parties, including former President Mohamed Nasheed. According to the Maldives ministry of foreign affairs 'The Commonwealth has sought to become an active participant in the domestic political discourse in the Maldives, which is contrary to the principles of the Charters of the UN and the Commonwealth' (The Telegraph 2016).

In the past Maldives have tried to maintain a foreign policy which establishes a relationship of equidistant or neutrality with other countries (Phadnis and Luithui 1981: 171). According to Phadnis and Luithui (1981), Maldives has succeeded so far to elicit developmental support from all sides while retaining an independence of sorts in action which belies its size. In recent times, the present President Mr. Yameen has increased its ties with China, USA and Saudi Arabia. The Chinese embassy in the Maldives opened a visa section on January 10, 2014 in order to allow Maldivians to get Chinese visa directly from Male (Kumar 2016: 73). A number of Maldivian nationals pursue their religious studies in Pakistani madrasas controlled by various jihadist groups and many numbers are

enrolled in Saudi Arabian madrasas (Manoharan 2014). One of the biggest gain in cooperation between Saudi Arabia and the Maldives is in the area of Islamic affairs i.e. the Saudi Prince has pledged to build 10 'world-class' mosques in the archipelago (Kumar 2016: 87).

President Abdulla Yameen launched the nation's new 'foreign policy' in January 2014 which is focused on enhancing national sovereignty and protecting the Islamic identity of the country. The newly formulated government policy promoted sovereign equality of States in accordance with international law, and gave emphasis to consolidating friendship with all countries based on mutual respect (GOI 2014). Similar to the earlier foreign policy of Mr. Gayoom, the new foreign policy focused on economic development of the country. The new foreign policy formulated by President Yameen provides greater opportunities for Maldives to collaborate with other countries for economic development. In April 2016, President Yameen visited Delhi and met the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and declared the 'India-first' policy which was a reciprocal approach for India's 'neighbourhood first' policy declared by the Modi government in 2014. There were six agreements signed by the two countries which also include a defence cooperation pact. The other agreements signed were in the fields of taxation, tourism, space research and conservation. Both the countries agreed that they share a common perspective in regard to security of the

Indian Ocean and, the Maldivian President said that is why 'the Maldives pursues an India first foreign policy. The security of the Maldives is intimately linked with the security of India' (Voanews 2016). The two countries also agreed to cooperate in counterterrorism amid concerns that there have been instances of young Maldivians leaving for West Asia to join Islamic State.

India's Maritime security relations with Maldives:

After the terrorist attack on 26th of November 2008 in Mumbai, in which the terrorist came from the sea, India is concerned that there is potential threat of such similar scale in future as well. Thereafter, India has taken measures to strengthen its naval security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Another recurring incident which has affected India's security and also import and export of shipping commercial cargoes are from the Somalian pirates. From 2005 onwards, Somalian pirates started operating in the Indian Ocean and this has been a security threat for India as well as its neighbourhood. The pirates hijacked commercial ships and the growing notoriety of Somali piracy was at its peak in 2012. In 2011, there were 237 attacks and the annual cost of piracy was estimated to be up to \$8 bn (£7 bn) (BBC 2017). In December 2010, the Indian Navy launched Operation Island Watch for intensive patrolling of the Indian waters.

In August 2009, the Indian Defence Minister Mr. A. K. Anthony visited

Maldives and signed a bilateral pact with the Maldives. The major reason for the signing of the pact was to not only strengthen the strategic ties with the island country but also to curb the growing presence of China in the Indian Ocean. Under the pact, the two countries have agreed to bolster defence co-operation aimed at fortifying the security of Maldives. Due to the agreement signed in 2009, India permanently based two helicopters in the Maldives for surveillance and one Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) based on Addu Island and Hannimadhoo Island. India also helped in setting up radar stations on all 26 atolls which will be networked with the Indian coastal radar system and interlinked with the central control room in India's Coastal Command (Ghosh 2014: 288). In addition to the above, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) was tasked to utilise its Dornier aircraft for regular surveillance sorties over the islands, which considerably eased the fears of emerging threats, mainly from Somalian pirates operating near the area (Ghosh 2014: 288). An India-Maldives-Sri Lanka joint coast guard exercise (DOSTI XI) was held off the coast of Male (Maldives) in April 2012. Another joint exercise 'DOSTI-XII' were conducted by the Indian Coast Guard with the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Sri Lankan Coast Guard at Male, Maldives from 28-31 October 2014. The focus of these exercises was on Maritime Search and Rescue (M-SAR), Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Marine Pollution

Response (POLRES) and Anti-piracy operations (Kumar 2016: 145). For the first time the exercises were also viewed by representatives from maritime forces of Seychelles and Mauritius (Kumar 2016: 145). In order to further strengthen India's maritime security along the littoral states of Sri Lanka and Maldives, a Trilateral Maritime Security Co-operation Initiative was launched under the first National Security Advisor (NSA) meeting held in Male in October 2011. The second NSA level meeting to take this initiative forward was held at Colombo in July, 2013. During this meeting the three countries had agreed on a roadmap for Maritime Security Cooperation. Subsequent meeting of NSA to look into the progress of the Trilateral Maritime Security Co-operation Initiative was to be held in Maldives but due to political turmoil in the country India's Prime Minister Modi cancelled the trip. Meanwhile, in March 2015 he travelled to Mauritius and Seychelles and put forward the policy of SAGAR- Security and Growth for all in the Region i.e. to have active collaboration for their collective interest of defence and security with the countries located in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Modi also expressed the hope that Mauritius and Seychelles would also join the ongoing Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation Initiative between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives (Baberwal 2016). According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 'India's Indian Ocean policy, he said, would be based on building up India's own capabilities,

helping regional partners with capacity building, collective action, sustainable development, and co-operation with non-Indian Ocean region actors to ensure greater transparency, rule of law, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. He also laid out the objective of integrated maritime security coordination between India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius, initiated in 2011 as a trilateral India-Sri Lanka-Maldives arrangement' (Ghosh 2014: 287).

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region is one of the core concern for India. For India the maritime security is a significant concern for India's foreign policy. The geostrategic importance of the region in regard to security, shipping and navigation and the scope of trade and commerce with the African continent have turned China's interest towards India's littoral states. The energy flows through the Indian Ocean are of particular consequence. Some 36 million barrels per day-equivalent to about 40 per cent of the world's oil supply and 64 per cent of oil trade—travel through the entryways into and out of the Indian Ocean, including the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb (Jaishankar 2016). In order to have access to the Indian Ocean region, China has maintained extremely good diplomatic ties with the island countries (i.e. Sri Lanka and Maldives). China has forged long-term economic and military ties with Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka including building of ports, providing military weapons and training to armed forces.

China first established bilateral ties with Maldives in 1972 which was confined to trade and commerce. However, in 2011 China opened its embassy in Maldives for expanding its relation beyond export and import of commodities. The Chinese tourists form the largest number of the Maldivian tourism industry and in 2013 more than 330,000 Chinese tourists visited Maldives. The Chinese government has undertaken projects to build houses, roads and bridges in the island nation. The Chinese have given ¥50 million (US \$8.2 million) in development aid to the Maldives and want to construct 1,500 housing units (Kumar 2016: 73). China is also trying to engage the Maldives in the agricultural sector and signed an agreement on agricultural and research project cooperation in April 2014 to provide grant to the Maldivian farmers. In 2014 for the first time the first Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Maldives for signing agreements for Chinese infrastructure development in Maldives. President Xi Jinping's 21st century new 'Maritime Silk Route' hinges on projects in the Maldives, and during his visit to the Maldives in September 2014, Mr. Xi discussed several big projects, like the 1.5 km 'China-Maldives friendship bridge' project connecting Male with the airport island Hulhule. Meanwhile, Maldivian Foreign Minister Mohamed Asim visited China and met Liu Liange, President of the Chinese Export-Import (Exim) Bank, in Beijing to take forward discussions on the loan-agreement for developing Male's international airport. The Chinese bank had

granted a US \$373-million loan for developing and upgrading the Male airport in 2015. Earlier the Male airport contract was given to GMR Group, an Indian company but in 2012 due to change in the government the contract was cancelled with the GMR group. The Indian company had to bear huge losses amounting to US \$300 million.

India has become increasingly wary that the Maldivian government has passed the constitutional amendment allowing foreign nations or entities to own land if the total volume of investment exceeded US \$1 billion. Previously foreign entities could only lease the land for 99 years. There are dozens of luxury resorts owned by foreign companies which follow the lease agreement of 99 years. According to the current Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen, the amendment will boost the Male economy which creates opportunities for large scale investment. In December 2016, Maldives government leased 'Feydhoo Finolhu', an uninhabited island near the country's capital city of Male, to a Chinese firm for 50 years at a cost of US \$4 million. India is concerned about the negative impact of leasing a 'Feydhoo Finolhu', island close to Male city and the construction of the airport to a Chinese firm. However, in an exclusive interview, the new Maldivian Vice-President Ahmed Adeb told *The Hindu*, 'Our sovereignty is not on offer', adding, 'We don't want to give any of our neighbours, including India...any cause for concern. We don't want to be in a position when we become a threat to our neighbours' (*The Hindu* 2017).

The increased mutual cooperation between China and Maldives might be extended further in the near future to strategic partnership. China already has strategic ties with Pakistan and it maintains the Gwadar port and similarly it has ties with Sri Lanka and maintains the port at Hambantota port. These ports according to China are maintained for commercial purposes but clandestinely may be used to assert the naval presence in the Indian Ocean. It is apparent for China to have strategic interest in the Indian Ocean since the US Naval base (i.e. Diego Garcia is at close proximity with Maldives). India fears that if China sets a military base in Maldives in future, it will certainly have a geo-strategic dominance over the region and hence endanger India's cordial relations with Maldives. In order to reduce the impact of Chinese influence on Maldives, the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and Maldives President Abdulla Yameen have signed a defence pact in New Delhi in April 2016. On the defence pact, the Prime Minister said that the 'prompt implementation of a concrete action plan in the defence sector will strengthen our defence cooperation. Development of ports, continuous training, capacity building, supply of equipment and maritime surveillance will be its main elements' (Livemint 2016).

Conclusion:

India-Maldives relations in comparison to other countries of South Asia can be described as harmonious and

there has been no major conflict on any issue. Maldives's political stability is the foremost concern of India. Since India believes that peaceful co-existence is possible in the South Asian region only if the countries restore political democracy in their respective states. The political crisis in Maldives and the presence of Islamic extremism in the island has vast implications on India. The country witnessed a terrorist strike for the first time in Sultan Park on September, 2007, when a bomb explosion occurred in Male and 12 foreigners were injured, including British, Japanese and Chinese tourists. Intelligence agencies of the United States and India have noted this development with concern and believe that the growing religious extremism in Maldives is a Pakistani import (Roul 2010: 7). With several incidents of Islamic terrorist activities and the existence of radical Islamic groups in Maldives, India suspects that the island nation's territory will be used as a breeding ground for terrorist attacks against India. In 2007, a radical Muslim was arrested by Kerala police and he was accused in the Male bomb blast. Such connection between the Maldives and Kerala is not just a threat to Maldives, but Indian security as well.

India in its efforts to make the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), free from military threats and pirates has made defence agreements with Maldives and other IOR countries. But Maldives's new foreign policy announced in 2014 clearly asserts

its Islamic identity and aims for fast economic development through foreign investments. Maldives has opened its market for global investment and has multiple agreements with China, so unless India prioritises the requirements of Maldives and support the country both politically and economically, Maldives might drift away from Indian vicinity in the years to come.

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