

# Indo Maldivian Conundrum and Suggested Road Map for Bilateral Growth



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## Abstract

The study was conducted to analyse the importance of Maldives for the security of India and complex India Maldives relations which has been changing with change of regimes in Maldives. Maldives is located close to the world trade route and historically had good relations with India. As such, it is important for India to maintain friendly relations with Maldives due to recent traces of growing ISIS fundamentalism in the Island archipelago and the interest of China and Pakistan in the Internal affairs of the country. After few difficulties in bilateral relations, trajectory of India Maldives relations now appear in the correct direction.

**Keywords:** Maldives, Security, Indian Ocean.

## Introduction

The Island nation of Maldives, a nondescript but extremely scenic atoll, has through the time derived its significance from the Indian Ocean. Maldives is located at the centre of the approximate circular shape of the Indian Ocean, and sits on the critical trade routes that cross through the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is the region that houses more than 49% of the worlds proven oil and gas reserves, 20% of the worlds coal reserves and is estimated to have the largest amount of seabed polymetallic nodules. The seas are not only a vital conduit of energy for the world but also is extremely rich in fishery. Almost two thirds of the world's oil shipments, One third of the bulk cargo shipments and half of the world's container shipments go through the Sea Lines of Communications in the Indian Ocean<sup>1</sup>. India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity and enjoy close, cordial and multi-dimensional relations. India was among the first to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country.

Maldives is located about 300 Nautical Miles (556 Km) from our Southern coast and about 450 Nautical Miles (833 Km) from South Western coast of Sri Lanka and has a chain of 1192 islands out of which 199 are inhabited. Comprising a territory spanning roughly 298 Sq Km, the Maldives is one of the world's most geographically dispersed sovereign states as well as the smallest Asian country by land area and population. By the sheer virtue of being located astride the sea trade routes passing through the Indian Ocean, they have been exposed to multiple cultures and religions. With the spread of Islam all along the African coastline, this idyllic country, a tourist paradise in the Indian Ocean, has of late become yet another victim of Islamic fundamentalism. The geo-strategic position of the islands permit control over the proceedings in the Indian Ocean and could have a direct bearing over the entire shipping passing from the gulf of Aden to the Malacca Straits. With the increasing interests of various nations in the seas, their involvement in the infrastructure development of Maldives is not the sole cause for concern; it is the eventual utilization of these islands for furthering their national interests and gaining strategic advantages that mandates serious deliberations. Considering the strategic location of Maldives in the Indian Ocean, it becomes vulnerable to any powerful country that has any kind of presence in the Indian Ocean be it economic or strategic. Being at the cross roads of the busy sea trade routes, Maldives also comes in contact with various influences, cultural and religious and most of these influences are not friendly towards India. The gravitation of Maldives towards such powers would render India's southern peninsula more vulnerable not only to a sub-conventional threat but also open up another front in the conventional domain.

Maldives forms a vital part of the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. According to Robert D. Kaplan, the Indian Ocean could be at the centre of an emerging rivalry between India and China in the 21st century, with the United States playing the role of a moderator. With the USA shifting its focus from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, a term that loosely comprised of areas astride South East Asia, East Asia, Australia and the USA, the airport and seaport facilities of Maldives have acquired a premium for China. USA already has a presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with its Diego Garcia islands that are only 400 miles from Maldives. For India, Maldives acquired greater strategic significance post 9/11 and the Mumbai attack as it realized that airborne and seaborne terrorism from Maldives could enter India with little resistance.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this paper is to undertake a geopolitical analysis of the strategic importance of Maldives and understand its seesaw relationship in the recent past with India with a view to arrive at proposed way ahead for better bilateral relations with Maldives.

#### **Hypothesis**

It is hypothesized that Maldives would play a crucial role for India not only in the future as it grows economically into a regional power and wants to exert its influence in the Indian Ocean but also in countering the threat from extremist elements entering India through its maritime boundaries.

#### **Strategic Significance of Indian Ocean Region in General and Maldives in Particular**

The Indian Ocean emerged as a Geographically significant region in the nineteenth century as the sea faring European nations discovered the vast untapped natural wealth that the countries in the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) possessed. With improvements in ship design and capability, these nations were able to pierce through the vanguard of the security of these nations that had mainly faced only a land war till then. Post colonization, the Indian Ocean became the vital conduit to transport the exploited wealth. The significance of these sea trade routes increased further in the twentieth century with the discovery of oil and gas in the countries along the IOR. Transiting through the vast Indian Ocean has remained a challenge ever since the beginning of this saga. For the Europeans, the choice was to navigate along the coastline from the Horn of Africa till Indonesia, which was long and tedious and involved dealing with numerous small countries along the way, or to take a direct route from the Horn of Africa to Iran, India or Indonesia. The second option though shorter than the first, involved long risky voyages in the open seas, without a port for rest and replenishment. The only ports that lie enroute are in the islands of Maldives and Diego Garcia.

Traditionally, all great powers that aspired to control the Indian Ocean have sought a base in the Maldives – Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The

southernmost island of the Maldives, the Gan Island in the Seenu Atoll, served as a base for the British Royal Navy during World War II. Gan met the requirements for safe, deep anchorage in a strategic area. The Naval Base in Gan was set up by Britain in response to Japanese advances against Singapore and Indonesia during World War II. During the Cold War, in 1957, it was transferred to the British Royal Air Force (RAF). The RAF vacated it in 1971 after Maldives gained independence in 1965. Following the British departure, the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Gaddafi of Libya, and the Soviet Union all tried to secure the Gan Island base to counter the US military presence in Diego Garcia<sup>3</sup>.

Nearly 1,200 islands of Maldives are grouped into a series of coral atolls, and are located close to the Equator in Indian Ocean. The maximum height of these islands is only 7.8 ft. above sea level. This island nation would be the first to face the onslaught of the rise in sea levels due to global warming. These low-lying species of corals have been subject to erosion, some of them were severely damaged during the Tsunami of December 2004.

The strategic significance of Maldives can be derived from the strategic significance of Indian Ocean. Stretching from the Persian Gulf and the coast of East Africa on one side to the Malay Archipelago and the shores of Australia on the other, the Indian Ocean comprises of an area of over 28 million square miles. Thirty nations constitute the ocean's littoral region and are home to one-third of the world's population. This region is extremely rich in natural resources and contains more than half of the world's proven oil reserves. In addition, a host of important minerals such as iron, titanium, chromate, and manganese, as well as such raw materials as rubber and tin, are found in abundance in the littorals<sup>4</sup>.

The Indian Ocean is also vital for transporting those materials to various markets. It is a key transit route for the oil from the Persian Gulf to consumers in Europe and Asia. Seventeen-million barrels of oil a day (20% of the world's oil supply and 93% of oil exported from the Gulf) transits by tanker through the Strait of Hormuz and into the western reaches of the Indian Ocean. Twenty-two percent of America's oil imports and over fifty strategic minerals that the U.S. relies on come from or transit through the littoral region of the Indian Ocean<sup>5</sup>.

While large amounts of oil make their way to Europe and the Americas via the Suez Canal and the Cape of Good Hope, the more important route is eastward, as twelve of the fourteen countries in East and South-East Asia are highly dependent on Gulf oil<sup>6</sup>. Roughly \$70 billion worth of oil annually crosses the Indian Ocean from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, bound for markets in Japan, China and Korea and another \$26 billion worth flows to India. Japan's economy is almost completely dependent on Gulf oil, with nearly 83% of its imported oil coming through the Indian Ocean. China and India are also increasingly reliant on oil transiting the region. At present, more than 40% of China's oil

imports come from the Middle East, while Gulf oil accounts for 65% of India's imports. In terms of global trade, the Indian Ocean is a major conduit linking manufacturers in East Asia with markets in Europe, Africa and the Persian Gulf. Half of the world's containerized cargo travels the ocean's busy sea lanes annually, with one third of world trade transiting the straits linking the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean to the eastern Indian Ocean<sup>7</sup>.

Such is the importance of this route from the straits of Hormuz to the Straits of Malacca, that some commentators have termed it the "new silk road"<sup>8</sup>. Sustained economic growth in the entire world depends, in part, on an uninterrupted flow of the oil and mineral resources of the Indian Ocean Region. This causes the region to assume a strategic significance for many nations. Any political or military developments that adversely affect the flow of oil, raw materials or trade goods could impact major economies. Therefore, the security of Indian Ocean sea lanes is of vital interest for the countries of not only the immediate littoral region but also the entire world. Any country that were to dominate the Indian Ocean would command the oil and trade routes from the Middle East to Europe and Asia—thereby gaining the potential to exercise considerable influence over the industrialized world. As the world's strategic centre of gravity shifts from the Euro-Atlantic region to Asia, the Indian Ocean is increasingly seen as "the ocean of destiny in the 21st century"<sup>9</sup>.

Considering its import dependent economy, India has a strong interest in the security of the ships that transit the Indian Ocean to bring goods and energy to market. Also if India is to play out its growing stature and influence in the world affairs, it needs to have a demonstrable capability of securing these sea lanes. The northern sea lane that runs from the Persian gulf to the ten degree channel runs along the Indian coastal line for most of its run. The security of this lane can be ensured with the assets available for the nations maritime security. However, for influence on the southern lane from the Horn of Africa and Sunda Straits, the Indian Navy would not only require true blue water capabilities but also bases/friendly ports in the Indian Ocean to support its operations.

American interests in the Indian Ocean littoral are driven by a mixture of economics and security. Among the most significant concerns are the need to secure the sea lines of communication that transit the region, the desire to prevent a hostile power from dominating the littoral, and the presence of numerous nations in the region plagued by instability and religious fundamentalism. As the world's largest economy, the United States has a strong interest in the security of the ships that transit the Indian Ocean to bring goods and energy to market. The requirements of trade and energy thus make the continued free passage of shipping through the Indian Ocean of supreme importance for the United States. In addition to its interest in protecting the freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, the U.S. hopes to prevent a hostile power from holding

the littoral hostage to gain political leverage by threatening the flow of commodities in the region<sup>11</sup>.

Chinese interest in the Indian Ocean dates back to 1405-33, when Emperor Yongle and his successor sent Admiral Zheng He and 27,000 men on seven voyages into the Indian Ocean—as far as Hormuz, Mecca, and Mombasa—to proclaim the power and prestige of the new Ming dynasty. But China subsequently turned inward and suffered a "Century of Humiliation" beginning in 1840, when it was invaded and partially colonized<sup>12</sup>. Today, China's naval platforms and weaponry suggest an "access denial" strategy consistent with Beijing's present focus on the Taiwan issue and other local maritime territorial claims. Yet, China's growing maritime interests and energy dependency may gradually drive more long-ranging naval development. It is likely that China's naval power projection beyond Taiwan will be directed not eastward across the Pacific but rather south and west along the strategic sea lanes to Africa and the Middle East<sup>13</sup>. The development plans of the PLA Navy (PLAN) includes increased construction and deployment of nuclear attack submarines, surface combatants, and support vessels in the Indian Ocean (the two recent instances of Submarine docking in Sri Lanka are an indication), improvement of aerial refuelling and development of deck aviation and significantly increased blue water training and operational capability. However, to ensure a credible naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the PLAN would need to work on its at-sea replenishment capacity. It also appears to be securing basing rights in locations such as Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and maybe Maldives. Writing in the official journal of the Communist Party of China, PLAN Commander Wu Shengli and Political Commissar Hu Yanlin stated "to maintain the safety of the oceanic transportation and the strategic passageway for energy and resources... we must build a powerful navy." There are indications that Beijing's Indian Ocean ambitions may grow with its national power. China is likely to learn from the U.S. and develop several overseas bases in the Indian Ocean littoral countries and build three or four aircraft carriers<sup>14</sup>. While China's current naval inclinations toward the Indian Ocean may not be clearly spelled out, in the longer term, these plans could challenge the region's status quo.

Maldives sits astride the sea trade route between the Horn of Africa and Sunda Straits; this is the route that carries the cargo primarily from the south American and west African countries to the East Asian countries and China. Also, the northern tip of Maldives is about 100 Nautical Miles (185 Km) from the sea trade route between Bab-al-Mandeb and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. The island nation also enjoys a unique geographical status; it is at the centre of Indian Ocean, though well separated from all the Indian Ocean Rim countries but located crucially to bring about enough influence on the security and trade within the Indian Ocean.

For India, or for that matter any nation, looking to exert its influence in this region, Maldives becomes a critical partner. For any contingency in the

region, if flexibility and speed of response are required, the central location of Maldives would make it the ideal base from which to launch operations. However, to achieve this there would be a need for a forward posture that calls for the Maldivian government permitting basing of air and sea assets at bases within the country. With a single base of Diego Garcia, 300 nm south of Maldives, the US has shown the ability to react quickly in the South Asian region. The base was utilized extensively during the Afghanistan operations and is a crucial base for housing the assets of CENTCOM. In fact, this is the strategy followed by the US across the world, wherein the small islands like Guam and Diego Garcia have remained under occupation of US and the allies (NATO countries) and have been utilized by them to quickly mobilize in case of any disturbances in the region. Similarly, gaining and maintaining access to the overseas bases in the Indian Ocean is necessary to project power for India in a dynamic regional environment.

The significance of having bases in the centre of the Indian Ocean that could receive Indian Warplanes and Warships, if not operate them, has force multiplier effect. While the induction of Flight Re-fueller Aircraft has considerably increased the ranges of the Warplanes, this increase is bound by the limits imposed due to availability of a diversionary landing strip within the fuel carried by the aircraft, especially so over the oceans. For example, if the aircraft is in the middle of the Indian Ocean with full fuel that gives it a range of 2000 Km, but there is no friendly airfield in that distance and the aircraft or the accompanying Re-fueller aircraft develops a snag that precludes further fuel transfer, there would be no choice for that aircraft but to crash into the sea or land in a hostile country. Similar is the case with a warship and its accompanying tanker, albeit with less disastrous consequences. Therefore, if the range enhancement from the tankers is to gainfully utilize the availability of bases at regular intervals is mandatory. This is the reason for the US to develop the Diego Garcia base with parallel 12000 feet runways and a full-fledged Naval Port.

Maldives has nine airfields, of which two are international airports and can be utilized for all kinds of military operations, the others can be used as advanced landing ground for transport operations. As far as seaports are concerned, of the six available ports, two can handle large warships. The facilities may be far less than required for a significant build-up of material for a major military engagement; however, should the need arise to surge units and equipment to the area, planners could requisition the facilities there.

However, unlike Diego Garcia that is an island under lease from UK by the US wherein the reliability and availability of the base for all types of operations is guaranteed, Maldives is a sovereign country which may not readily provide complete access and may not be a reliable partner in India's efforts. What Maldives lacks in terms of reliability as of now, it makes up for in terms of its strategic

location. Although the atoll remains remote by thousands of miles to any one area of interest, it is central to many. The contradiction between the geo-strategic location and reliability of the Maldivian government can be resolved by focusing on the political, economic and diplomatic aspects of the relationship. It should be possible for India to adopt a benevolent big brotherly attitude towards Maldives and build sufficient leverages so that it is able to obtain assured access to its maritime and aviation facilities.

#### **India Maldives Relations: Unfolding Events and Current Trajectory**

Traditionally, Maldives and India have shared friendly and cordial bilateral relations except for the brief period after the controversial resignation by Mohamed Nasheed as President in the Feb 2012. During the time when Abdulla Yameen assumed the Presidency of Maldives (from Nov 2013 - Nov 2018), Maldives had veered too close to China for India's comfort, welcoming Chinese money for major infrastructure projects and signing a controversial free trade agreement (FTA). In spite of Maldives's India first policy, relationship deteriorated and came to the lowest level of spectrum during the regime of Abdulla Yameen.

India's entreaties for political moderation and traditional closer security ties with Maldives were summarily ignored by the Maldivian regime ostensibly for nefarious designs by Abdulla Yameen, the then President of Maldives. It is interesting to note that Abdulla Yameen has recently been arrested for corruption charges related to kickbacks of millions of dollars.

The setbacks of past, before the current regime took charge in Maldives, has led to following multi-dimensional coercion on Indian economy and diplomacy:-

1. Licenses of Indian traders and investors were cancelled which manifested in slowed down or largely stagnant Trade flow.
2. Diplomatic pitfalls as Maldives aligned itself towards China which led to stalling of Construction and Manufacturing projects and allotment of the same to Chinese counterparts.
3. Mr. Yameen, Ex President of Maldives ignored constant nudge of India and even a rare warning not to impose emergency in Island nation.
4. Extension of visa of 26 Navy personal operating Advanced Light Helicopters (ALF) were denied
5. Return of helicopters gifted by India Issue of visa to thousands of job seekers in India.
6. Maldives veered itself close to China allowing it to invest in various infrastructure projects.
7. It signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China and ignored treaties with India for political moderations and security concerns.
8. Maldives now owes 1.3 billion dollars to China which is one third of GDP of Indian island neighbour.

The downslide of India Maldives relations continued till Nov 2018 when Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a close ally of Mohamed Nasheed and a founding

member of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), won most votes and was sworn in as the 7<sup>th</sup> President of the country.

Mr. Solih's recent visit to India on 26 Nov 2018 witnessed the two sides emphasise their traditionally close bond. He called India as the island nation's "closest friend" and "reaffirmed his government's 'India-First' Policy. Number of positive initiatives were announced by both sides during the maiden visit by President Solih to India. India, for its part, announced a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion for the Maldives in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit enabling Maldives to survive China's debt trap. Both sides also agreed to ensure that they would keep other's security interests in mind as they consolidate cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Also, both sides agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance. Indian side stated that it wants "a peaceful, stable, democratic and prosperous Republic of Maldives". Mr. Solih also affirmed that close friend India will be given priority under "India First" policy.

New Delhi, thus, is making serious attempts to regain some of its lost space in the Maldives' foreign policy and politics. Male has also made it clear that while the neighbourhood will clearly be a priority for the Solih government, China will continue to play an important role as an economic partner. So China is not going to disappear from the Maldivian foreign policy matrix. Nor should India expect it to. But the logic of geography dictates that India's role will be critical in determining the trajectory of political developments in the Maldives.

Relationship between India and Maldives now appear to have taken a positive turn in the recent days after the phase where the relationship between both the countries had soured.

#### **Threats Emanating From Maldives**

It is obvious that Maldives would be incapable of posing a direct conventional threat to India. The likely threats that would emanate from Maldives would either be from non state actors and state sponsored terrorists operating from Maldives or from the use of Maldivian territory by inimical powers for support of conventional operations against India.

Despite being a 100 percent Sunni state, Maldives was considered to be immune to Islamic radicalism due to their progressive outlook and the free flow of ideas coming through the trade routes. However, in the recent years, Maldivians in increasing numbers have been drawn towards Pakistan-based madrasas and jihadist groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba, which has established a foothold especially in the southern parts of Maldives in the garb of relief operations after the 2004 tsunami. Events in the Middle-east, Afghanistan and Pakistan have also influenced Maldivians towards radicalization. Lack of adequate educational and employment opportunities have been pushing the Maldivian youth towards jihadist groups and other violent gangs. At any point in time, a number of Maldivian nationals pursue their

religious studies in Pakistani madrasas controlled by various jihadist groups. And very many numbers are enrolled in Saudi Arabian madrasas. On return, they come back not only with radical ideas, but also with jihadi connections. These madrasa-educated are being influenced to fight in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya. They also help in the direct recruitment of Maldivians for jihad. The first-ever terror attack in Maldives took place in September 2007 at Sultan Park in capital Malé in which 12 were injured. Investigations pointed fingers at the Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen, a new Maldives-based terror group, which had links with the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). The masterminds reportedly fled to Pakistan. What is more worrying for India was the infiltration of Indian terror group Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) to Maldives, especially after its crackdown in India. The concern for India is how Islamic radical forces have been gaining political influence in the Maldives.

During an interview to 'The Independent' magazine of UK on 07 Sep 14, the former President of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed warned that up to 200 Maldivians were fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria. In addition at least four were known to have been killed in fighting in the past six months, while in the first week of November in the islands' capital, Male, there was a pro-IS rally featuring banners that called for the introduction of shariah law. The issue that enhances this threat is the fact that the strength of the IS sympathizers in the military and in the police is very significant with them occupying strategic positions within both. Of the 200 people who have gone to jihad, the vast majority are ex-military. Once the ISIS threat expands outside the Arabian peninsula, this trained force could be deployed against India. With the easy access available to Maldivian to enter India and their ethnic linkages with the population in Kerala, the chances of a terrorist infiltration through the sea, similar to the Mumbai attack in 2008, is very much a possibility.

The other threat manifesting from Maldives is the likely utilization of Maldivian bases by China either to support any direct action against India or to influence the trade in the IOR. During the visit of the then Chinese premier Zhu Rongji to Male in 2001 he managed to persuade the Maldivian government to grant them a base on Marao, one of the largest islands of the archipelago. It was also apparent that Pakistan had played an important role in pushing the deal through. The base was to become operational in 2010. Meanwhile, both the Maldivian and Chinese governments denied the reports and have since maintained that the deep sea surveys that were carried out were for environmental protection and not for military purposes. Marao is one of the largest of the 1192 coral islands grouped into atolls that comprise Maldives and lies 40 km south of Male, the capital.

Though there's no independent confirmation of the base, Robert D Kaplan, erstwhile senior fellow at the Washington-based Center for a New American Security, warns that "China's probing and expansion

into the Seychelles and Maldives should be of more concern to India. China's port projects around India in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka are commercial ventures with strategic and military potential". China is also reportedly constructing its first overseas military base in the Seychelles, not far from Maldives. China, in particular, seems interested in developing Ihavandhoo and Maarandhoo Islands, with transshipment ports among other things, as well as grabbing a piece of action in the development of the country's second international airport at Hanimaadhoo. These projects closely resemble the kind that Robert Kaplan warned against. They may appear innocuous and developmental projects on the face of it, but could provide the Chinese sufficient leverage to use them for military purposes. In May 2011, Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress visited Maldives. He was the highest ranking official to visit Maldives till then. The visit was the first indication of the increasing importance of Maldives to China's regional strategic calculations. The visit of the Chinese premier Xi Jinping in May this year further underscores this new found orientation of China.

To understand whether the US core interests in the Maldives and the area adjoining it, would pose a threat to India, directly or indirectly, there is a need to examine when and how the Asia-Pacific pivot of the US will impact the region. For years West Asia and the the countries in the western rim of the IOR have shared a close military relationship with the US; a relationship that has been built assiduously by the US to take care of its economic and energy security. The comprehensive reliance on the US for various aspects of their security and the economy has provided the US with considerable leverages that it utilizes to keep a tab on the developments in the neighbouring region.

The role played by the US in the region can be derived from the statement of President Obama during the address to the State Department "For decades, the United States has pursued a set of core interests in the region: countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safeguarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel's security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace." In all the focus areas indicated by the US president, the US interests are waning. It has clearly indicated its unwillingness to directly involve itself in the counter terrorist activities, though its support for a country doing so still exists. With effective measures put in place against the Iranian nuclear weapons, the involvement of the US in this field is likely to be through the IAEA and the other UN controlled atomic energy agencies only. While free flow of commerce will remain high on the priority list for the US, its importance has reduced due to the availability of Shale Gas/Oil within the US in sufficient amounts; the energy imports of the US from the region is falling. Finally, the US has managed to broker some kind of an agreement between Israel and the Arab country. Therefore, it is now in a position to look eastwards towards the Asia-Pacific which broadly starts from the east of Malacca towards the

Pacific Ocean. The former US defence secretary Leon Panetta outlines the new pivot by stating "By 2020, the Navy will reposition its forces from today's roughly 50/50 percent split between Pacific and Atlantic to about 60/40. That will include six aircraft carriers, a majority of our Cruisers, destroyers, Littoral Combat Ships and Submarines."

It is this posturing that is likely to create a space in strategic space in the Indian Ocean for powers like China to step in. The US itself may not want such a situation wherein it has to tackle China on two opposing fronts, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. This could open up a win-win situation for India and the US to start a new maritime partnership in the Indian Ocean. It's a partnership which is in the realm of possibility considering the changed political winds in India, Asia and the US. It is inevitable that Maldives would get involved considering its geostrategic location, the politico-cultural relations with India and the recent security deals it has struck with the US.

#### **Proposed way ahead**

The geo-strategic significance of Maldives, for any power projection by India in the future, is beyond doubt. As the Indian economy grows and the 'Make-in-India' campaign of the government fructifies, the Sea Lines of Communications passing through the Indian Ocean would gain more and more prominence. In this scenario if the trade is to flourish, the security of these routes would have to be guaranteed both in peace and hostilities. Towards this Maldives would play a significant role, if it provides the Indian Naval Ships and the IAF aircraft facilities for replenishments and turn around. However, this ambition of India to take on the role of the guardians of the trade is likely to be contested by China, which also has a significant amount of its trade plying on these routes. Therefore, it is also wooing Maldives equally strongly to provide it bases for replenishment of ships in peace and maybe even for support during any conflict.

India needs to capitalize on its historical/cultural relations with Maldives to thwart any overtures from other powers. The three overarching requirements to achieve this are political stability in the neighborhood, safety of its nationals and protection of its investments in Maldives and Maldives not falling under the influence of any forces (state or non-state) that are inimical to India. Considering the strategic importance of Maldives, it is imperative for India to ensure that Maldives continues to give the highest priority to India's interests while dealing with any other country. This is possible only through the exercise of soft power and utilizing its leverages well.

India should help Maldives in building its economy and address the needs of its training requirements. India should also provide developmental assistance to Maldives the way it has done recently for Bhutan and Nepal. The Framework agreement of November 2011 and the 2014 joint declaration provide the ground for deepening of the ties. The two sides should work out a comprehensive plan for developmental partnerships. The need of the day, is to talk openly and ask for Maldives to clearly

spell out its policies on Foreign investment. India could continue its economic aid to Maldives along with development projects that are underway. Malé is concerned about widening trade deficit with India. New Delhi needs to dispel this concern by articulating that the deficit could be bridged in the long-run provided Maldives becomes more investment friendly, especially to the Indian ones. India could consider without delay proposal from Maldives for the import of diesel, petrol and aviation fuel from India.

Mr. Solih has made it clear that China will be a strategic partner to Maldives so, India should not see Maldives from China-centric perspective. Maldives will need India in its acute problems. India should focus on building democratic institutes in Maldives. India will see its results in long term. Male has made clear that although India is its priority but China will also play and be an important part in its economic development. Instead of being deterred by the temporary setbacks, India should continue the positive engagement with Maldives to regain the lost space.

A stable democracy in Maldives is in India's interest. It is fortunate that the results of the November 2018 elections were accepted by all concerned. India needs to remain engaged with all sections of the society and its approach should be people-centric. India should share its democratic experiences to strengthen Maldives fledgling institutions of democracy. People-to-people contacts must be strengthened. During his term, Nasheed could not function properly mainly because of lack of cooperation from these institutions and hence had to go midway. Comparatively, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih is best placed to handle these institutions, especially judiciary and defence forces, due to his favourable disposition towards former president Gayoom and Mohamed Nasheed. However, the challenge before Ibrahim Mohamed Solih would be to gradually get these democratic institutions to function constitutionally, with proper checks and balances. The way forward, therefore, is to increase the objectivity and efficiency of democratic governmental institutions like the legislature, judiciary and the executive, including the defence forces, of the atoll state. The Maldivian democratic constitution is just about 11 years old. It is important, at this infant stage, to make sure that the constitution is improved upon without giving room for temptations to drift back to authoritarianism. India needs to help Maldives in this regard, but without leading to any impression of "interference".

It has often been argued that it is due to the American military primacy that it is able to underwrite the current economic globalization, as it is able to safeguard and suitably modify the flow of international commerce and energy and creates a security architecture that safeguards the existing international system<sup>13</sup>. India has the rightful ambition to play a leading role in the future world order. Economic strength would be the basis of such a rise in the future and economic growth cannot be sustained unless India has the military ability to control and influence

the sources and pathways of energy and flow of political ideas. Hence, India needs to develop the ability to project power across the Indian Ocean, an ability that it is deficient in. The capability of its warships and warplanes to exert influence from the east coast of Africa to the West coast of Indonesia would be achieved only if a friendly base is available somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Maldives is thus ideally located to fulfil this requirement. However, a bilateral alliance between the two countries may be seen by the citizens of Maldives as hegemonic and could lead to political instability in the country. The correct way to do this would be to take the path of alliances and military groupings, initially at the regional level and gradually expanding to the extra-regional and global level. The new government has already shown the inclination to walk this path with its emphasis on boosting the relations amongst the SAARC countries. Presently, this is primarily an economic grouping; the time has come to gradually evolve it into a military alliance. With the help of this, India can develop the ability to project power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in a manner that is sufficiently strong and broad-based to deter extra-regional threats, yet carefully calibrated to avoid provoking local opposition. India has already initiated a tri-lateral pact between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives for joint patrolling of the Indian ocean and the coast of Maldives; this needs to be strengthened and developed further. The force commitment from India needs to increase in proportion with its standing among the three nations. India also needs to be indulgent in terms of providing equipment and training to the Maldivian defence forces, this would provide the desired leverage to India to counter any growing extra-regional threat.

A regular bilateral security dialogue amongst the officials of both sides should be instituted to expand the scope of security cooperation. This should be supplemented by Track-II dialogues. India can help build think tanks in the country. Considering the rising influence of radical Islam in Maldives and alleged links of few of its citizens with ISIS, there is a need to strengthen our coastal security network in the southern peninsula. Kerala, with its demographic similarity and frequency of visits by the Maldivians, is particularly vulnerable. There is a need for higher involvement if intelligence agencies with Maldives so as to detect any such activity early enough for taking preventive action. To prevent any feeling of rising Indian hegemony in the region in that country these measures could be coupled with relaxation in the Visa rules between the countries.

A deeper and comprehensive engagement with Maldives as with the other neighbours is vital for India. Any hesitation in dealing with its neighbours will only invite external powers to step in making a difficult situation even more complex. With the visit of the newly elected Maldivian president to India in Nov 2018 in the aftermath of Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending his swearing in ceremony in Male and subsequently Visit by Mrs Sushma Swaraj, the External affairs Minister of India, to Maldives in Mar

2019, a good beginning has been made in the relations between the two countries and this should be truly sustained. Having said that it is necessary for India to make a Neighbourhood First 2.0 with Maldives. This can be done by-

1. Taking the recent proposal of \$1.4 Bn aid and currency swap agreements further.
2. Making Maldives partner in consensus building for aspects of maritime security.
3. Supporting Maldives' cause of entry in commonwealth group.
4. Creating export capacity to enhance North-East side trade taking Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles in consonance with India's goal of Ocean security and bringing focus back on SAGAR scheme.

While creating new relationship, India should also understand that presence of China is unavoidable in Maldives. Hence a calibrated diplomacy would go a long way in finding a collaborative middle path existence. India and Maldives have a long shared history of co-operation- Operation Cactus, Drinking water projects to name a few. It is time for India to build on these references.

#### Conclusion

Geopolitics in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) needs very much strategic view, where countries like China is standing tall. We can't develop the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) while isolating ties with neighbour countries.

The Island nation of Maldives, located at the centre of the approximate circular shape of the Indian Ocean, without doubt has unquestionable geo-strategic and military importance to any power that wishes to protect its interests in the region and also to any country wanting to project its power to the world.

The world is undergoing a significant geopolitical realignment as the global "centre of gravity" shifts from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. Sustained economic and military growth and increasing assertiveness in world affairs is likely to provide China the military ability to operate in the Indian Ocean. It is also likely to utilize the strategic space being vacated by the US in the countries on the western rim of the Indian Ocean. Its string of pearls strategy to acquire basing facilities across the Indian Ocean is well known. Such a strategy by China, could also be employed to checkmate the US pivot to Asia-Pacific.

Therefore, with the US already present in the region and China waiting with the foot inside the door, India will have to adapt its geostrategic focus onto the Indian Ocean that will continue to remain a critical conduit for the transport of trade goods and energy. However, its littoral is awash with weak states that are characterized by ethno-sectarian tensions, making them unreliable partners in times of crisis. India has not yet been able to build reliable relations to obtain friendly-nation bases in this area that could support any of its future sustained operations in the Indian Ocean. Maldives, whose location and historical connections with India provide the bridge between the two countries, could form a significant launch pad in the future for both routine operations and crisis response. It is ideally located to fulfil an important regional logistic support role for operations far away from the mainland.

To achieve this, India needs to build the broken bridges between the two nations through economic and political cooperation and deepening of cultural and ethnic

relations. India cannot afford to have another thorn in its vicinity. It is normal to have issues, but what is important is addressing them in the right frame. For this, it is important to understand the dynamics of various actors and actions in the atoll state. It is a good sign that Indian Prime Minister visited Maldives and witnessed the swearing in ceremony of President Solih which would enhance the rapport and personal touch of both the leaders with each other enabling further impetus to bilateral relations.

#### End Notes

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