

# US seeks defence agreement with Maldives

K. Ratnayake  
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The US is pushing the Maldivian government to sign a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to build military bases in the island country, which is in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It is another significant move by the Obama administration in its aggressive “pivot to Asia” to militarily encircle China in the vast Indo-Pacific theatre.

It is not new for the US military to have access to Maldivian infrastructure, following a number of agreements in the 2000s. In 2010, Washington signed an “Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement” (ACSA) with the previous government of President Mohamed Nasheed, which allowed the US to use its airport and sea port facilities. The new pact, however, will significantly expand the earlier arrangements.

A copy of the agreement, entitled “Status of Forces and Access to and Use of Facilities in the Maldives”, has been obtained and published by the Maldivian current affairs blog, *DhivehiSittee*. The SOFA will provide a legal framework for a virtually unrestrained US presence, including military bases, in the archipelago of 1,192 islands.

Maldives is located strategically near major sea lanes. More than 80 percent of the world’s seaborne trade in oil passes through Indian Ocean chokepoints, with 40 percent going through the Persian Gulf’s Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait, at the base of the Red Sea.

Naval and air operations from Maldives could potentially threaten countries that depend on these sea lanes for energy supplies and raw materials. China, with its vast demand for oil and minerals from the Middle East and Africa, is the most obvious target.

The proposed 10-year SOFA provides “for the temporary presence and activities of US forces” in certain situations, but does not specify those situations. The draft declares that “US personnel shall be accorded

the privileges, exemptions and immunities equivalent to those accorded to diplomats under Vienna Conventions.” In other words, disciplinary control and jurisdiction over US personnel will be in the hands of the Pentagon, with immunity from Maldivian law.

American personnel and contractors will have freedom of movement and access to agreed facilities, including for transportation, storage and training. Aircraft, vehicles and vessels “may enter, exit, and move freely within territory and territorial seas of the republic.” They will not be subject to taxation or inspection.

The US “shall be responsible for the construction, development, operations, and maintenance cost of agreed facilities and areas provided for the exclusive use of its forces.” This clause would permit the building of US military bases.

The US will be allowed to have its own telecommunication systems, together with access to airports, sea ports and agreed facilities and areas. “All disputes shall be resolved through consultation, and shall not be referred to any national or international court.” This means that the Maldivian government will have no legal jurisdiction over the US military and its personnel.

Robert Blake, the US assistant secretary for South and Central Asia affairs, confirmed the agreement with the Maldives, but claimed there were no plans to build US military bases there. “This SOFA does not imply some new up-ticks in a military cooperation or certainly does not imply any new military presence,” he insisted.

Washington’s assurances cannot be taken at face value. Similar agreements with other countries, including the puppet regime of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, have involved the construction of major US bases.

On March 27, top Maldivian government officials,

including the defence, tourism and home ministers, vice president and police commissioner, were flown to the US aircraft carrier USS John C Stennis, which had sailed near the Maldives. No information was released about what was discussed with the delegation.

After the visit, the two countries signed an agreement to install a border control system in the Maldives using US information technology. This has effectively placed the country's entry and exit points under American surveillance.

The Maldives SOFA will enhance the United States' strategic position in the Indian Ocean. A defence analyst in India, M. K. Bhadrakumar said it would be "a tectonic shift in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean if the US secures a military presence in the Maldives."

The Pentagon currently operates one of the largest bases outside the US in Diego Garcia, further to the south in the Indian Ocean, through an arrangement with Britain, which retains colonial control. The Diego Garcia base has multiple landing strips for strategic bombers and port facilities for the largest US naval vessels.

China is seeking closer economic and strategic relations with the Maldives. A political crisis erupted in the Maldives when President Mohamed Nasheed was removed in a coup early last year by Mohamed Waheed, who was clearly backed by the US and India. The coup came after years of media speculation that China was seeking to build a submarine base in the Maldives, which some American strategic analysts had warned could pose a challenge to US forces in Diego Garcia, as well as the Indian navy in the region. (See: "Maldives president ousted in US-backed coup")

Just 400 nautical miles south of India, any Chinese naval presence in the Maldives is a concern to New Delhi, which depicts China's development of major ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh as a "string of pearls" strategy to potentially station naval vessels around India.

Within the Maldivian ruling elite, there are concerns about the proposed US defence pact, because of growing economic ties with China. China has become the largest source of visitors to the Maldives, which depends heavily on tourism. Last year, Beijing offered loans of \$US500 million to the Maldives, equivalent to one quarter of its \$2 billion annual economic output.

Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)

spokesman Hamid Abdul Gafoor declared: "We are wondering what our other international partners—India, Australia, etc.—think about this." Ex-president Nasheed, ousted in last year's coup, declared that the MDP would campaign against the agreement.

Defence Minister Mohamed Nazim sought to placate public concern by referring to the ACSA deal signed by Nasheed with the US in 2010, claiming that the SOFA was nothing new. His comments only confirm the government's intention to proceed with the agreement, thus enabling the US to alter the strategic landscape of the Indian Ocean.



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