

# Will India invade the Maldives?

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Indian media reports indicate that New Delhi is actively considering invading the Maldives, a tiny Indian Ocean archipelago that is the object of intense geopolitical competition between India and the United States, on the one hand, and China on the other.

Exiled opposition leader and former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed is publicly campaigning for India to intervene militarily, claiming India must act to “save democracy” in the Maldives and prevent it from being “sold off,” “piece by piece,” to China.

The *Times of India* reported Wednesday that India’s armed forces are “on standby for any contingency in the Maldives from evacuation of Indian tourists to military intervention.” It added that India’s military is ready for “deployment at short notice,” already has military personnel in the Maldives under existing defence cooperation agreements, and could readily divert “warships currently on patrol on (its) western seaboard ... if required for military intervention.”

India’s government, along with the US, Britain, and the European Union, has strongly condemned Maldives President Abdulla Yameen for imposing a 15-day state of emergency and suspending basic democratic rights so as to thwart a February 1 Supreme Court ruling that overturned Nasheed’s conviction, ordered the release of eight jailed opposition legislators, and restored 12 legislators to their seats in parliament.

Yesterday, New Delhi refused to receive a “special emissary” from the Maldives government tasked with explaining its actions.

Traditionally, India has had very close relations with the Maldives, which, as a fellow member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), it views as a part of its sphere of regional dominance.

The strategic significance of the 1,192-island state has grown exponentially as the Indian Ocean, site of the world’s busiest commercial sea-lanes, has emerged during the past decade as a pivotal arena of global geostrategic competition.

However, to the chagrin of India and the US, Yameen’s four-year-old government has forged close economic ties with China, agreeing to participate in the maritime component of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative and signing a free trade pact with Beijing last December.

Large sections of the Indian media and at least one BJP legislator are publicly urging New Delhi to act decisively to

ensure that the Maldives is aligned with New Delhi and its partner Washington.

“This is an opportunity for India to stake its claim to being a player once again,” said Manvendra Singh, who in addition to being a BJP politician edits “Defence and Security Alert,” “especially since any global role is always dependent on a country’s performance in the neighbourhood first.”

In an editorial titled “India must play hardball if it wants to be part of the Maldives’ return to stability,” the *Hindustan Times* called for coercive diplomacy, including sanctions, and if necessary military intervention.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have, for their part, kept their cards close to their vests.

Under Modi, India has massively expanded its military-security alliance with the US, mounted cross-border military raids in Pakistan and Myanmar, and engaged in a seven-week military standoff with China over a remote Himalayan ridge claimed by Bhutan, a tiny kingdom New Delhi has long treated like a protectorate.

Military intervention in the Maldives, however, would present a number of difficulties. First, the Maldives’ security forces have up until this point proven loyal to the government. Second, for India to intervene to topple an internationally recognized government would violate New Delhi’s longstanding claims, however hypocritical, to uphold the international principle of “state sovereignty.” Finally, while there is little doubt New Delhi could have US and British assistance in invading the Maldives, to do so would shatter any pretense that India remains committed to “strategic autonomy.” This would both antagonize China and provoke opposition among Indian workers and toilers who, unlike the Indian bourgeoisie, have no enthusiasm for serving as local satraps for American imperialism.

Whatever unfolds in the coming days and weeks, India’s response to the political crisis in the Maldives—the unmistakable signs the Modi government is weighing the pros and cons of military intervention and the brazen media discussion about the need to thwart Chinese influence in the Maldives—underscores that South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been sucked into the maelstrom of great-power conflict and that this is leading inexorably toward military competition and conflict.

Yameen is the half-brother of Abdul Gayoom, who with India's staunch support ruled the Maldives as an autocrat from 1978 to 2008. He became president in 2013 after a contested election and since then the Maldives has continued to be buffeted by political crisis. With Yameen's government expanding the Maldives' ties to China, the US and Britain, and India somewhat more cautiously, have increasingly promoted Nasheed, first by securing his release from prison on medical grounds in 2015.

The latest stage of the crisis began when the Supreme Court on Feb. 1 unexpectedly reversed its own previous rulings. The order to restore the twelve legislators, many of them defectors from Yameen's own party, directly threatened his government as their return to parliament would strip it of its majority.

However, Yameen blocked the judgment from being implemented, and after imposing the state of emergency, had two of the Supreme Court Justices jailed, and then prevailed on the remaining three justices to reverse the Feb. 1 ruling.

Maldives' police claim to have "evidence" that the earlier verdict was manipulated, with Supreme Court justices accepting millions of rupees in bribes and conspiring with the former president and autocrat Abdul Gayoom. Gayoom has been taken into police custody and is to be charged with attempting to overthrow the government.

With Yameen increasingly resorting to antidemocratic authoritarian measures to protect his fragile rule, Nasheed is claiming to be spearheading a campaign to restore democracy to the Maldives.

But his appeals for the support of India, the US and other western imperialist powers and on an explicitly anti-China platform have become ever more unabashed.

In a statement published in the February 7 *Indian Express*, Nasheed pledged his fidelity to the strategic interests of India and the US, denouncing Chinese investment in the Maldives and the OBOR as a threat to "the security of the entire Indian Ocean region."

Later the same day, he tweeted, "Maldivians see India's role positively: in '88 they came, resolved the crisis, and left. They were not occupiers but liberators."

The reference to '88 is to the deployment of 1,600 Indian troops to the Maldives in 1988 to thwart a coup attempt by Maldivian businessman Abdulla Luthufi, which used fighters from a Sri Lankan Tamil separatist organization, the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

Of course, Nasheed glosses over the fact that for decades India backstopped Gayoom's autocratic regime.

The Indian press is full of alarmist accounts of China's attempts to dominate the Indian Ocean. In fact, everything they accuse China of doing, India and its US ally have long been engaged in.

In 2013, Washington sought to bully the Maldives into signing a Status of Force Agreement (SPFA) that would have provided the legal framework for a massive US military

presence across the archipelago, including military bases and diplomatic-style immunity for all American military personnel.

M.K. Bhadrakumar, a former career Indian diplomat and critic of India's burgeoning strategic alliance with the US, pointed to the real issues motivating India's relations with Maldives in an Asian Times article titled, "Maldives crisis: US-Indian strategic alliance forming."

"Hand-wringing about a 'democracy deficit' notwithstanding," writes Bhadrakumar, "the real aim is to counter China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean."

The "script," he goes on to note, "has a striking resemblance to what happened in Sri Lanka." There, Washington and India used the January 2015 presidential elections to orchestrate a "regime change," by getting Maithripala Sirisena to defect from the government and stand as the "common opposition" candidate against the sitting president, Mahinda Rajapakse, who was deemed too close to China.

The strategic plans of the US, into which India is now being incorporated, call for Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints to be seized, so as to enforce an economic blockade against China in a war or war crisis. Pointing to this, Bhadrakumar writes, "The real US-Indian game plan is to create a 'second island chain' connecting Maldives with Diego Garcia and Seychelles to curb the presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean and to control the sea lanes through which China conducts the bulk of its foreign trade."

China, as would be expected, has voiced opposition to any Indian intervention in the Maldives. "The current situation in Maldives is its internal affairs," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang on Wednesday. "China follows the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others."

State-owned *Global Times* was much blunter. It declared New Delhi "has no right to meddle" in Maldives, adding, the "small country of the Maldives has long faced a choice: should it free itself from India's control and consolidate its independence as a sovereign state or not?"



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