

Indian elite alarmed as Maldives gravitates toward China

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Recent developments show how the Maldives, a tiny country of 1,000 coral islands and around 400,000 people, spread across 35,000 square miles of the Indian Ocean, has become embroiled in the escalating geo-political struggle between the major regional and global powers.

Sharp tensions have been created in the region by Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. India has become a frontline state in US preparations for war against China in order to re-assert Washington's post-World War II supremacy.

The Maldives, which had affirmed an "India First" policy a few years ago, is now developing close relations with China. Underscoring the downward spiral of relations with India, Maldives is the only country in the region that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not visited since his election in 2014.

The Indian ruling establishment is seriously concerned. According to a July 8 report in the *Hindustan Times*, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj held a meeting with India's South Asia ambassadors to discuss how to counter growing Chinese influence, including in the Maldives.

The July 3 meeting, held on the sidelines of a Head of Missions Conference, discussed India's "three-pronged" approach to deal with China's presence in what New Delhi regards as its neighbourhood. New Delhi will "track Beijing's activities carefully; pursue its own projects and commitments; and educate and advise neighbours on the consequences of engaging with China," the newspaper reported.

The presentation on Maldives "focused on how there was a conscious attempt by the regime in Male to erase the Indian footprint altogether and China had gained tremendous leverage with investments, already made or

in progress, in an airport, bridge, islands and port."

In another setback to India, the Maldives signed an energy deal with India's arch-rival Pakistan, the *Maldives Independent* reported on July 8. Though the agreement's details remained unclear, the report said it was struck between Maldives STELCO (State Electricity Company) and Pakistan's WAPDA (Water and Power Developing Authority).

Pakistan's power sector heavily relies on Chinese expertise, resources and finance to build and operate coal-powered power plants, hydro-electricity stations and wind farms. Because of these ties, Beijing is assumed to support the Maldives agreement.

The strained relations with India were displayed on June 5, when the Maldives government asked India to remove a "gift" naval helicopter from Laamu atoll, where China is considering building a port. Maldives wants New Delhi to remove another "gifted" chopper by the end of this month.

Together with the two helicopters, New Delhi had stationed six pilots and over a dozen ground personnel, creating a small military foothold in a strategically significant area of the Indian Ocean.

An Indian government official told the *Times of India* on June 5: "Even Addu (the location of the other Indian chopper) is significant as it is located at the Equatorial Channel and close to Diego Garcia. It seems Male wants to rid both these strategic locations of any Indian footprint."

Diego Garcia is a critical US base in the Indo-Pacific, hosting deep-water naval and long-range air force facilities, as well as up to 5,000 troops.

The *Times of India* also reported a delay in work on an Indian-funded police academy in the Maldives. The Maldives immigration department is holding up new work permits for skilled Indian personnel whose

presence New Delhi considers essential for the project. Hundreds of Indians working in resorts, hospitals and colleges in the Maldives also have been denied work visas for the past few months.

Relations with India have been strained since February, when Maldives President Abdulla Yameen imposed a 45-day emergency and arrested two Supreme Court judges, including the chief justice. Under pressure, the remaining judges overturned previous court orders granting freedom to arrested opposition leader and former president Mohamed Nasheed along with eight other political leaders.

India has called for democracy to be “restored” in Maldives, i.e., the release of opposition politicians, so that Nasheed can contest coming presidential elections. However, the Yameen administration has intensified its persecution of the opposition. Maumoon Abdul Gayoon, another former Maldives president, was sentenced to prison for one year and seven months, together with former Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, for plotting to overthrow the government.

Nasheed, who was ousted in 2012, is backed by the Western powers, and India wants their intervention to secure their grip over the Maldives. Pointing to the Yameen government’s close relations with China, Nasheed has called on India and the Western powers, particularly the US, to help him to return to office so he can reorient Maldives’ foreign policy.

In 2016, Nasheed was given asylum in Britain, where he had gone for medical treatment. During a June 4 press conference in Colombo, he accused China of dragging the Maldives into a debt trap. He said the total loans for infrastructure projects by China’s Exim bank should be “easily more than \$US2.5 billion” and roughly equivalent to Maldives’ gross domestic product.

Nasheed’s selection of Sri Lanka to hold the press conference underscored his pro-Western line. Washington and India orchestrated a “regime change” operation in Sri Lanka via the January 2015 presidential election, installing a government with a pro-Washington foreign policy. They worked behind the scenes to bring President Maithripala Sirisena to office because of former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s economic and political ties with China.

Beijing is forging close relations with the Maldives as a part of its efforts to counter Washington’s moves to

encircle China. More broadly, Beijing has developed its massive “One Belt, One Road” project to link China to Europe, as well as Africa, by land and sea. Washington regards this infrastructure program as a serious challenge to its global power.

China has invested heavily in the Maldives and is the biggest source of tourists to the archipelago, which relies heavily on tourism. The Maldives has joined the Eurasian infrastructure initiative and signed a trade agreement with China.

Maldives occupies a strategic expanse of the Indian Ocean, near the southwest tip of India, and close to important sea lanes from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia, South East Asia and Australia. In particular, these routes provide China, as well as Japan, South Korea and India, with access to Middle Eastern oil, placing the archipelago at the centre of an explosive conflict.



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