

The US reinforces political and military relations with the Maldives

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Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid's recent US trip underscores the strategic importance of this small Indian Ocean archipelago to Washington's foreign policy. Shahid, accompanied by senior government officials, was invited by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Last month's trip came after Shahid's earlier visit to India—Washington's strategic partner in the region—to boost relations with that country. The new Maldivian government is distancing itself from China and strengthening its political and military connections with Washington.

As well as Pompeo, Shahid met with Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Alice Wells and Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale, as well as officials from the US National Security Council, USAID and the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. He also held talks with the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Nathan Alexander Sales, about involvement in future programs.

Shahid declared that Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy was good for his country and stability in the Indian Ocean. Contrary to this assertion, however, the US is the principal destabilising factor in the region.

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's government came to power in November 2018, following a Washington-orchestrated operation to remove President Abdulla Yameen's administration, and to politically realign the island country away from China and toward the US.

Washington's geo-political manoeuvres in the Indo-Pacific region are aimed at establishing a tight network of alliances to militarily encircle China.

Shahid endorsed Washington's claims of commitment to a "free and open" Indo-Pacific region.

In fact, under the guise of "freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea, Washington is provocatively violating the 12-nautical-mile territorial limits around islets claimed by China, including Mischief Reef in the Spratly islands group.

On February 21, Shahid signed a Memorandum of Agreement on Aviation Cooperation with Alina Romanowski at the US State Department. Romanowski is the State Department's principal deputy coordinator on counter-terrorism. Washington's counter-terrorism posturing is a cynical lie. The US is responsible for the rise of Islamic fundamentalist forces, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, and the death of millions of civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq and across the Middle East and North Africa.

Maldivian security forces are being integrated into Washington's military plans. The US will provide training to local law enforcement bodies and a new aviation security advisor at Male International Airport.

Shahid's meeting with Pompeo also involved discussions on "judicial sector reforms, efficient governance and rule of law, transparent public financial management and anti-corruption." No details were made available about these talks.

Washington reportedly agreed to assist in "civil society development," including improvements in infrastructure and education. China remains the largest infrastructure investor in the Maldives but India is moving to displace Beijing.

The Solih government has accused the former Yameen administration of creating a debt crisis by borrowing heavily from China and has appealed for financial assistance. Beijing claims that the Maldives' debt to China is only \$1.5 billion, but Solih insists it is much larger.

While Washington wants to fully integrate the

Maldives into its geo-strategic operations, it has offered only a financial pittance—approximately \$US9.5 million—in assistance. Shahid, however, responded enthusiastically, tweeting: “Had productive meetings with senior officials @State Dept. Both sides agree that we are living through some of the best times in the relationship between the Maldives and USA...”

Running parallel with the reorientation of Maldivian foreign policy, President Solih has launched an “anti-corruption” campaign against the pro-Chinese faction of the country’s ruling elite. Anti-China critics claim that previous government infrastructure projects were awarded to Chinese investors at inflated prices and that corruption was institutionalised.

Several leaders of the pro-Chinese opposition, including former President Yameen, have been arrested on corruption allegations. Yameen has been accused of receiving \$US1 million in government money.

According to the reports, a private company operated by Yameen’s supporters deposited government money into the former president’s personal account at the Maldives Islamic Bank. The alleged money-laundering operation involved more than \$79 million in tourism revenue.

Yameen has denied the allegations, telling reporters in January that the money was given to him by “various parties as campaign funds.” His lawyers have declared that the Anti-Corruption Commission has not proven that the money was “state funds obtained through corruption.”

Yameen’s five-year-administration was marked by escalating attacks on the media and democratic rights, with nearly all opposition leaders arrested or forced into exile. The current administration’s so-called fight against corruption and “for good governance,” however, is a cover for its pro-US foreign policy.



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