

Indian defense minister visits Maldives to strengthen strategic ties

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Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh made a three-day visit last week to the Maldives, a strategically located archipelago in the Indian Ocean, amid intensifying US war preparations against China. Given India's role as the major military-strategic partner of the US in the South Asian region, the trip was to bolster New Delhi's economic and military ties and to counter Chinese influence.

Singh had bilateral discussions with Maldives President Ibrahim Solih, his counterpart, Mariya Ahmed Didi, and Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid, and met with representatives of the Indian diaspora.

On May 2, Singh presented the Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) with a fast patrol vessel and a landing craft. "The India-Maldives relationship is truly special," he declared at the handover ceremony. "India, Maldives, and other like-minded nations of the region [need] to enhance our cooperation, towards addressing the common challenges of the Indian Ocean Region."

In other words, India is stepping up its efforts to enlist all the countries in the region into a broader alliance against China.

During his discussions with Singh, President Solih thanked India for "the significant progress achieved in the hydrography surveys being conducted" and for supplying the relevant equipment.

Singh and Didi formally laid the foundations of the MNDF Coast Guard's Ekatha Harbour, one of India's largest grant-in-aid projects in the archipelago. This involves construction of the harbour and repair facilities at Sifavaru Island, northwest of Male, the capital.

Both countries agreed to intensify and broaden cooperation in the security and defence fields. Several Indian ships, a Dornier plane, and two Dhruv Advanced

Light helicopters are already in use in the Maldives.

The Maldives, with a population of just 521,000, lies next to key shipping lanes crucial for uninterrupted energy supplies to countries like China, Japan and India. Along with fishing, the Central Indian Ocean Basin's seabed minerals, such as polymetallic nodules, increase its economic significance. Rare earths and other minerals found in these nodules are essential for green technologies like solar panels, wind turbines and electric cars. The race among the major powers to secure these minerals will intensify as countries cut carbon emissions.

Singh's trip follows a January 18 visit by S. Jaishankar, India's minister for external affairs. He oversaw the transfer of two sea ambulances, signed agreements on health and education, and extended a \$US40 million line of credit for sports facilities. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Maldives last August.

Solih became president following elections in late 2018 after a Washington-New Delhi orchestrated regime-change operation against his predecessor, pro-Chinese President Abdulla Yameen. India has rapidly increased its influence in the Maldives since then through defence agreements and investments. New Delhi considers the region its backyard and is deeply concerned about China's developing influence.

In accordance with India's "Neighborhood First" and "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) policies, New Delhi is now involved in disaster management, infrastructure development, building capacity, maritime security and humanitarian aid in the Maldives.

A serious political rift exists in the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Solih became the opposition

alliance candidate in the 2018 presidential election, because the Electoral Commission ruled that former President Mohamed Nasheed was ineligible to run. Following his elevation into the presidency, Solih has consolidated his position in the government and the MDP and refused to hand over the party leadership to Nasheed.

The MDP has officially declared that Solih has won a primary ballot to be its candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections, due in September. According to the MDP, Solih won the primary with 61 percent of the vote.

Nasheed, who is currently parliamentary speaker and stood against Solih in the primary ballot, has alleged “voter fraud” and is yet to concede. The dispute has raised concerns of new political turmoil and a possible split in the MDP ahead of the September elections.

While the Solih administration has closely aligned the Maldives with India, it has not completely broken relations with China, which heavily invested in infrastructure projects under previous President Abdulla Yameen.

The main beneficiary of the rivalry in the MDP is the opposition led by Yameen, who is currently in jail. He was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment after being found guilty of corruption and money laundering charges. Yameen is appealing the sentence.

India is concerned that any shift in the administration in favour of Yameen will result in the Maldives expanding its ties with China.

The Maldives is being torn by intensifying geopolitical rivalries between China, on the one hand, and India and the US, on the other. At the same time, the escalating US-led war in Ukraine against Russia is drastically impacting on the archipelago’s fragile economy and has sharpened tensions within its political establishment.

Singh’s Maldives visit is in line with New Delhi’s ongoing diplomatic and military efforts to bolster its dominance in the region. Last week, the Indian Air Force’s chief air marshal Vivek Ram Chaudhari made a four-day official visit to Sri Lanka, meeting with President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena to strengthen their defence engagements and cooperation. The trip follows a four-day visit to Sri Lanka by India’s Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar’s last December.



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