

# Sri Lanka and Maldives: Battle grounds for geo-political rivalry in the Indian Ocean

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Sri Lanka and the Maldives, two small island nations in the Indian Ocean straddling strategic East-West shipping routes, have become focal points in the rapidly intensifying geopolitical tensions between the US and India on one side and China on the other.

On February 3, the INS Karanj, an Indian navy submarine, docked in Colombo, Sri Lanka's main port, for a two-day visit. It was greeted with a ceremonial reception by the Sri Lankan navy. Commander Arunabh, the submarine's commanding officer, paid a visit to Rear Admiral Saman Perera, the commander of the Sri Lankan Navy's Western Naval Area.

This response was in sharp contrast to the Sri Lankan government's treatment of a recent request by the Chinese research ship Xiang Yang Hong 3 to visit the country. In January, the Wickremesinghe government announced a 12-month ban on all visits by research ships, a ban clearly aimed at stopping the Chinese ship, its visit having been publicly opposed by India.

China says that its ship is involved hydrographic surveys and planning underwater paths for its submarines. New Delhi claims it could be monitoring missiles or satellites test-fired from surrounding locations, as well as keeping an eye on military installations in neighbouring countries.

Abhijit Singh, Head of Maritime Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, told Voice of America on January 29: "Our suspicion is that this vessel, although it is an oceanographic research vessel, is gathering information that could be used by China to expand its undersea military operations and improve its anti-submarine warfare capabilities, as it studies the Indian Ocean environment, the seabed, temperature profile, eddies, currents, etc. That means China will have an edge militarily in the Indian Ocean in times to come."

In any case, the Chinese ship did not have to wait long before it was welcomed elsewhere. In a clear slap in the

face to India, the Maldives government announced its clearance for the Chinese ship to dock there.

The decision followed an announcement by the recently elected Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu that India must withdraw all its troops from the country by March 15. India traditionally regards Maldives as part of its strategic backyard and has a small military presence there. Muizzu, who is known to be pro-China, had just returned from a state visit to Beijing. His announcement underscores a strategic shift away from India.

The Indian submarine's Colombo visit indicates how New Delhi is aggressively working to establish its geo-political dominance in the Indian Ocean region.

On February 5, India's *Decan Herald* declared that the submarine's visit to Colombo was "aimed at highlighting India's role as the primary security provider in the Indian Ocean region and sending a message to China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy), which has recently increased its activities in the maritime neighborhood of India."

The *Hindu Times* echoed this, commenting on the same day that it "marks a diplomatic win for India amid a tiff over China's maritime movement in the Indian Ocean Region."

INS Karanj is a 2,000-ton conventional-propulsion submarine but capable of undertaking a range of roles, such as surface vessel combat, anti-submarine warfare, long-range strikes, special operations and intelligence gathering.

So-called courtesy calls to Sri Lanka by Indian navy submarines and ships have become routine. INS Vagir, another submarine, visited Colombo in June last year to commemorate the International Day of Yoga.

India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been transformed into a frontline state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. Last August, the Modi government announced that it is working with the high

command of India's armed forces to identify what support it will provide to the US if and when Washington goes to war with Beijing.

While New Delhi views countries in South Asia as its traditional sphere of influence, its geo-political aims are not limited to the region. In the revised and reformulated version of the 2015 Indian Maritime Doctrine, New Delhi's status in the Indian Ocean Region was updated. Although New Delhi has declined to join the US-led task force attacking Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, it currently deploys two frontline warships in the Gulf of Aden and at least ten warships in the northern and western Arabian Seas, accompanied by a surveillance plane. This is its largest deployment in the region.

India's naval visits to Sri Lanka are part of its efforts to bring Colombo firmly into its economic, political, and military embrace.

India is now Sri Lanka's largest investor, economic partner and source of new tourists. New Delhi has agreed to build a pipeline from southern India to Sri Lanka, a solar power project, liquefied natural gas infrastructure, and a high-capacity power grid link.

Trincomalee, the strategically important harbour in eastern Sri Lanka, will be developed as an industrial hub and port with logistical facilities with a similar development at Kankesanthurai in the North. India also supported Sri Lanka's efforts to secure a \$US3 billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and granted a \$US4 billion long-term loan during the island nation's unprecedented and ongoing economic crisis.

Plans are also underway to sign an Economic and Technical Co-operation Agreement between Sri Lanka and India next March to reduce trade barriers for goods and services.

To further enhance transport links, a passenger ferry service between India's Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai in Jaffna is also expected to commence at the end of this month, reinitiating a sea link between the two countries after a 40-year gap.

Indian tourism to Sri Lanka is already substantial. In a transparent attempt to undercut Indian tourism to the Maldives, essential to its tourism-driven economy, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar urged Indians to visit Sri Lanka on their next vacation.

India is also reaching out to opposition parties in Sri Lanka, such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its National People's Power (NPP) parliamentary front, to ensure that whoever comes to power in the next elections

will remain aligned with New Delhi's geo-political interests. Early this month, the Modi government invited a JVP/NPP delegation headed by its leader Anura Kumara Disanayake on an official five-day visit.

Just a few days after banning the Chinese ship visit, the Sri Lankan government announced that it would send ships to support Washington's Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea against Houthi militia in Yemen.

In response to Indian and US-led efforts to undercut Chinese influence and bring Sri Lanka into their orbit, Beijing has moved to strengthen its strategic relations with the Maldives. When President Mohamed Muizzu visited China, he was given a lavish red-carpet welcome.

A previous agreement for construction of an Ocean Observatory on Majunudhoo in the Maldives to be jointly operated by China's State Oceanic Administration and the Maldives' Ministry of Environment and Energy was signed during the tenure of the former Maldivian president, Abdulla Yameen.

The project, however, was set aside following his defeat in September 2018. India is now concerned that the deal will be revived under Muizzu. Though Beijing insists the observatory's primary purpose would be ocean observation and research, New Delhi claims it will grant Beijing access to a critical region in the Indian Ocean for both commercial shipping and strategic purposes.

Tensions are now rising as the deadline for Indian troop withdrawal draws close. On January 25, the Indian Navy Chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar told CNN-News 18 that the Indian government had not given the order for its defense personnel to leave Maldives in response to Male's request. "We await instructions, whatever is the decision," Kumar said.

India and the US are determined to counter Chinese influence in Male. When Sri Lanka drew closer to China under President Mahinda Rajapakse's government, New Delhi backed Washington's regime-change operation in the 2015 presidential elections and supported the installation of the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe administration. New Delhi and Washington will conduct a similar regime change operation against the new Muizzu government if they deem it necessary.



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