

# The Maldives signs military pact with China

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The Maldives signed a defence agreement with China on March 4 during a visit by a Chinese military delegation headed by Major General Zhang Baoqun to the country. According to a Maldivian defense ministry statement, the agreement is for Beijing's "provision of military assistance gratis" and the "fostering stronger bilateral ties."

The signing of the agreement will undoubtedly ring alarm bells in New Delhi and also Washington as the US and India heighten their confrontation with China in South Asia and preparations for war. The Maldives, a group of islands, sits across critical shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean.

The head of the Chinese delegation, Major General Zhang, held "comprehensive discussion on strategic partnerships and enhancing defense cooperation" with the president of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu.

The military agreement with China is the first signed with any country. While the details have not been made public, under the agreement, China will provide non-lethal military equipment and training to the Maldives.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told reporters on March 5 that Beijing is "committed to working with the Maldives to build a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership." She said that the cooperation was not against any other country, but warned that it "will not be disrupted by any third party."

India's relationship with Malé has been strained since the election of pro-Chinese Muizzu as president last September, ousting the sitting President Mohamed Solih, who had close ties with New Delhi. Muizzu campaigned during the election on an "India-out" platform.

After taking office, Muizzu first visited Turkey and then China, breaking the tradition that a newly-elected president should visit India first. The Indian ruling class regards the Indian Ocean as its sphere of influence. During his five-day state visit to China in January, Muizzu signed 20 agreements with Beijing.

Muizzu has demanded that India withdraw some 90 military personnel stationed in the Maldives. Their

presence is nominally to operate two helicopters and Dornier aircraft for marine surveillance, search and rescue operations and assisting in medical evacuations from more remote islands.

The Muizzu government is also not going to renew its agreement with India to conduct hydrographic surveys and is going to review over 100 agreements signed with India under previous administrations.

On February 22, the Maldives allowed the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03, which carries out hydrographic surveys, to dock. Under pressure from India and the US, Sri Lanka earlier refused to allow the same Chinese research ship to dock in Colombo Port.

The rivalry between India and China for influence in the Maldives has predominantly centered around infrastructure development. Beijing's main infrastructure project is the \$US200 million China-Maldives Friendship Bridge.

Significantly, just days after the China-Maldives military agreement, India commissioned a new naval base, INS Jatayu, on March 6 on its southernmost island of Minicoy. The island is part of the Lakshadweep archipelago off India's southwest coast. The base is India's second in the archipelago and closer to the Maldives.

In comments clearly aimed against China, Admiral Hari Kumar, India's navy chief, said that it was vital to recognize the urgent need for heightened monitoring in view of current geopolitical developments. The Indian Navy has stated that the new base was part of efforts to augment security infrastructure at the strategically important islands.

Just a week before, New Delhi inaugurated an India-financed airstrip and jetty on the tiny island of Agalega in Mauritius. The country's prime minister, Pravind Jugnauth, denied that Agalega could be used as a military facility, but its position in the western Indian Ocean close to Africa underlines its strategic significance. India has also secured logistical access to Oman's Duqm port.

India, along with the US, is also strengthening relations

with Sri Lanka. Pro-US Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe's made his first official visit to India last July, met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and signed economic and trade agreements that enhance India's economic influence in the island.

Outpacing China, India has become Sri Lanka's biggest investor, economic partner, and source of new tourists. The deep-water West International Terminal at Colombo Port will be built by India's Adani Group at an estimated cost of \$US700 million in partnership with the US International Development Finance Corporation, which is providing \$553 million.

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh boasted of his country's growing influence declaring that India "today emerged as the first responder and preferred security partner in the IOR [Indian Ocean Region]."

Taking aim at China, Singh declared: "India is ensuring that all the neighbouring countries of the Indian Ocean should be helped in protecting their autonomy and sovereignty. We have ensured that no one exercises hegemony in the region." In reality, that is precisely what India, with US backing, is aiming to do.

Last month, four senior US government officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma, visited Sri Lanka last month for discussions on expanding strategic ties with Colombo. Verma sought to deepen defence and maritime collaboration between the two countries, including by strengthening Sri Lanka's naval capacities.

As the US accelerates its preparations for war against China, it is transforming every country into a diplomatic battleground. As the new president in the Maldives seeks to implement his "India out" policy and strengthens ties with China, he will undoubtedly face a campaign of political destabilization by India and the US.



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