



INDIA AND MALDIVES; DEVELOPING DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region is gaining significance over the years. The Island states located in the ocean have realised their significance in the changed geopolitical atmosphere. Amongst the island states in the Indian Ocean, Maldives has special significance for India as it is vital for securing India's growing energy needs which are fulfilled through the SLOC's lying near the island state. The growing influence of non-littoral naval powers in the Indian Ocean, particularly the Chinese navy and its activities to encircle India are not secret. India needs to have better cooperation and ties with Maldives to protect its interest in the Indian Ocean, contain the Chinese advent, protect its huge coastline and maintain peace and stability in the IOR.

Key words: *Indian Ocean, Maldives, Island, sloc, security, navy, treaty*

Introduction

The Indian Ocean gained strategic relevance in November 1994 after the United Nations Convention on Laws of Sea came into effect and nation states started to identify their national interests with freedom of navigation and oceanic resources.

The Indian Ocean, which lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Australia, houses a number of littorals that play critical roles in the region. The IOR is a vital sea lane with choke points such the Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Malacca, Bab-el Mandeb, and so forth. These choke points are of immense strategic importance, as huge volumes of trade pass through them. These choke points are exposed to piracy, international disputes, political dissents, and accidents. To ward off such threats and to gain/maintain a strong foothold in this resource rich region, regional and external powers flex their muscles.

The islands in the Indian Ocean also work significantly to shape security architecture of the IOR. These islands play a vital role along the sea lines of communication (SLOC) by giving easy access to navies continued presence and allowing them to patrol and secure SLOCs during

the time of peace and war. The Indian Ocean acts as an intersection for the transport of oil from the Middle East. This is also the reason why external powers are trying to strengthen their footholds, making it a region for them to showcase their vigor and potentiality.

The Indian Ocean has a sizeable number of island nations located within its area. Island nations have gained importance in the present times due to variety of reasons, but mainly due to their strategic importance in the IOR. Island states like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Comoros have gained significance due to their location and the increased activity in the IOR. These states have started playing an important role in the changing geopolitical situation. The entry of the non-littoral naval powers in the Indian Ocean have forced the island states to take a relook at their Indian Ocean policy. Amongst the island states of the western Indian Ocean, the Maldives is an important island state from the strategic point of view for India.

The Republic of Maldives, is an archipelagic state in the Indian subcontinent of Asia, situated in the Indian Ocean. It lies southwest of Sri Lanka and India, about 750 kms. (470 miles; 400 nautical miles) from the Asian continent's mainland. The Maldives consists of 1,192 coral islands grouped in a double chain of 26 atolls, that stretch along a length of 871 kilometres (541 miles) north to south, 130 kilometres (81 miles) east to west, spread over roughly 90,000 square kilometres (35,000 sq. mi), of which only 298 km² (115 sq. mi) is dry land, making this one of the world's most dispersed countries. Lying between latitudes 1°S and 8°N, and longitudes 72° and 74°E, it is the smallest Asian country by land area.

India was among the first to recognise the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country. India established its mission at the level of CDA in 1972 and resident High Commissioner in 1980. The Maldives opened a full-fledged High Commission in New Delhi in November 2004, at that time one of its only four diplomatic missions worldwide. Bilateral relations have been nurtured and strengthened by regular contacts at the highest levels. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, almost all the Prime Ministers of India have visited the Maldives.

India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity. Except for a brief period during the early years of 2000, relations have been cordial and multidimensional. India was among the first to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965 and also to establish diplomatic relations with the country. Almost all the Indian Prime

Ministers have visited the Maldives and the Maldivian top leadership has visited India from time to time.

Maldives became a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It is also a member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Maldives in the Indian Ocean

The location of Maldives in the Indian Ocean gives it a strategic advantage. Its importance in the IOR cannot be overlooked by the states trading through the Indian Ocean. Maldives is referred as the Toll Gate in the Indian Ocean due to the two Sea Lines of Communication passing through the nations southern and Northern parts, enabling the supply of crude oil and other precious cargo across Asia.

The importance of Maldives in the Indian Ocean and particularly for India is due to number of factors. The Maldives Archipelago comprising of twelve hundred coral islands lie next to the important shipping lanes, thus making its location strategically very important. The shipping lanes are crucial for countries of Asia for their energy supplies. China, India, Japan and many other Asian states are dependent on this shipping lanes for the uninterrupted energy supplies which takes place through this SLOC's. These SLOC's are critical for the maritime trade flow between the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in South East Asia.

India and Maldives

India and Maldives have shared cordial relations with each other except for short periods of time when there was political upheaval in the Maldivian establishment. India was one of the first nations to recognise and establish diplomatic ties with the Island state. Over the years India has signed economic, commercial, trade, cultural and defence treaties and agreements with Maldives to strengthen its alliance.

In December 1976, India and the Maldives signed a maritime boundary treaty to agree on maritime boundaries between the two countries. In 1981, a Comprehensive Trade Agreement was signed to promote the development of trade and economic relations between the respective countries within the framework of their laws, rules and regulations, and to encourage and facilitate the visit of commercial and technical representatives. Since both the nations are founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asian Economic Union and signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement, there

is significant amount of trade and commercial activity between India and Maldives. Indian and Maldivian leaders have maintained high-level contacts and consultations on regional issues. Strategic partnership between India and Maldives is increasing in the recent years due to the changing geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region. Indian and Maldives have signed defence treaties which will ensure to secure interest of both the countries. The Maldivian Defence Forces Coast Guard was gifted a Trinket First Class Attack Craft by the Indian Navy in 2006 to enhance its defence capabilities. In the early 2009, after the Maldivian government requested India to provide security cover over its fear of terrorist attack on one of its small island, the Indian government initiated the process to bring the Island state into its security net. India has ensured the security of the Island nation by stationing two helicopters in Maldives for enhancing its surveillance capabilities and responding to any security threat. It has agreed to set up coastal radars chain which will be networked with the Indian coastal radar system, on all the atolls for seamless coverage of any approaching vessels and aircraft. The Indian Coast Guard will carry out regular Dornier sorties over the island nation to look out for any suspicious movement of vessels, which will be assisted by the Indian navy's Southern Command. In order to train the Maldivian Navy to be better prepared for securing its coasts, combat terrorism, piracy and other nefarious activities in the Indian Ocean, Indian and Maldives very year since 2009 hold a 14 day joint military exercise

Conclusion

As maritime economic activity in the Indian Ocean has risen dramatically in recent decades, the geopolitical competition too in the Indian Ocean has intensified. Rise in trade and commercial activities has made the security and protection of the SLOC's very important. Piracy, maritime terrorism, gun running are other security threats in the IOR which threaten the entire region. The increased presence of non-littoral powerful navies have also added tension in the already volatile region.

A favourable and positive maritime environment in the Indian Ocean is essential for the fulfilment of India's developmental priority. Thus, India continuously aims at promoting an ever-expanding area of peace and stability around it. While SLOCs in the vicinity of the Maldives have broader strategic significance for global maritime trade, these are of vital importance for India since nearly 50 per cent of India's external trade and 80 per cent of her energy imports transit these westward SLOCs in the Arabian Sea. Maldives, an important partner in India's role as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region,

will play a key role in this due to her strategic maritime geography and India cannot disregard its cooperation and significance given its 7516.6 Kms of huge coastline.

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