

United States-Maldives Defence Pact: What Lies Ahead for India?

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Summary

A defence and security agreement signed between the United States (US) and the Maldives will give larger space to the former in the Indian Ocean. Unlike 2013, India has welcomed the US-Maldives defence pact of September 2020 in a bid to check the growing dominance of China in the South Asian region.

On 10 September 2020, the Maldives and the United States (US) signed a framework for a defence and security relationship in Philadelphia. The US was represented by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for South and Southeast Asia, Reed Werner, while the Maldivian Minister of Defence Mariya Ahmed Didi signed on behalf of her country. Didi called the agreement “an important milestone”.¹ Quoting the minister, the Ministry of Defence, Maldives, tweeted, “Defence & Security Relationship will add immense value to the excellent US-Maldives partnership defined by shared principles & interests in peace & security of IndoPacific & IOR [Indian Ocean Region] amid rising threats like piracy & terrorism.”² Details of the agreement have not yet been released in the public domain.

A press release by the US Department of Defence notes, “The Framework sets forth both countries’ intent to deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean.”³ Werner and Didi also agreed to work towards scheduling the first defence and security dialogue between the two countries.⁴ They also reiterated their respective countries’ commitment on a free and open Indo-Pacific region that promotes the security and prosperity of all nations in the region.⁵

This paper looks at the US-Maldives defence pacts of 2013 and 2020. It also discusses some possible reasons behind India’s welcoming the September 2020 defence deal between the two countries. At the same time, it examines the India-China military competition in the Maldives. Lastly, it discusses the ‘India Out’ campaign run by the Maldivian opposition parties.

¹ Mariya Didi, Twitter, 12 September 2020. https://twitter.com/MariyaDidi/status/1304554230020288512?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet.

² Maldives National Defence Force, *Twitter*, 12 September 2020. https://twitter.com/mndf_official?lang=en.

³ “The Maldives and US sign Defense Agreement”, US Department of Defence, 11 September 2020. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2344512/the-maldives-and-us-sign-defense-agreement/utm_campaign=digest/utm_medium=email/utm_source=nuzzel/. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

US-Maldives Defence Pact of 2013

To deepen their strategic relations, seven years ago, in 2013, the US and the Maldives agreed on a draft of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Some of the provisions of that draft leaked out⁶ and were published in Maldivian current affairs blog *Dhivehi Sitee*:⁷

- a. The US would have unfettered access to, and use of, not just the military facility (or facilities) to be established, but also over all Maldivian aerial ports and seaports for whatever purpose it wants.
- b. The designated areas agreed between the Maldives and the US would be sealed off for “exclusive use by the United States forces”.
- c. The US would have the authority to secure “the vicinity” around the island(s) in whatever way the US deems is necessary for the safety of Americans.
- d. The US personnel based in the Maldives would have all diplomatic privileges, exemptions and immunities equivalent to that offered by the Vienna Convention.
- e. American vehicles and vessels would be free to move within all Maldivian territory and territorial seas as they wish. The US aircraft or vessel could not be boarded and inspected.

Many in the Maldives saw the SOFA as an attempt by Dr Mohamed Waheed Hassan’s government (2012-2013) to allow the US to set up a military base in the country. This was refuted by then-Defence Minister of the Maldives, Colonel (Retd) Mohamed Nazim, who continued with his position in the next government under President Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018). In an interview with *Sun* in April 2013, Nazim said that the SOFA “does not involve establishing a base.”⁸ However, as opposition mounted against the SOFA, the then-newly elected government under Yameen did not pursue the US proposal.⁹ One of the chief reasons for the Maldives not pursuing the SOFA was India’s opposition to it. Then-Minister at the President’s Office of the Maldives, Mohamed Shareef, said, “We have told them [US] that we can’t do it because both India and Sri Lanka are also not happy with it.”¹⁰

On condition of anonymity, an Indian official, privy to the developments on the SOFA, told the Indian media portal, *The Wire*, in 2020, “Yes, we [India] did discourage a SOFA in 2013 as it would have justified a similar agreement with China and an offer to us [India] as

⁶ Devirupa Mitra, “Seven Years On, India Now Backs a Defence Pact Between US and Maldives”, *The Wire*, 13 September 2020. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/seven-years-on-india-now-backs-a-defence-pact-between-the-us-and-maldives>. Accessed on 14 September 2020.

⁷ Azra Naseem, “A US military base in the Maldives?”, *Dhivehi Sitee*, 24 April 2013. <http://www.dhivehisitee.com/executive/us-military-base-maldives/>. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

⁸ “Maldives will not pursue defence agreement with US: President Yameen”, *Sunonline*, 23 January 2014. <https://en.sun.mv/19484>. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

well, leaving an outcome that was less desirable than the existing state. And in 2013 both [the US and Maldives] listened to us.”¹¹

Seven years later, in 2020, a somewhat similar defence pact was signed between the US and the Maldives. This time, contrary to 2013, India has extended its support to the agreement, though there is no official response on it yet.¹²

India’s Support for the US-Maldives Defence Pact of 2020

One of the main reasons why India has welcomed the September 2020 defence pact between the US and the Maldives is the growing challenge from an aggressive China in the Indo-Pacific region and in South Asia, which harms India’s own interests. In the past, India has tried to check Chinese military ambitions but in the last few years, it seems Indian policymakers have understood that they cannot do it alone and need the help of an equally powerful and friendly country. Such beliefs must have further deepened due to the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) continuous transgressions into Indian territory and over India-controlled Line of Actual Control (LAC). According to Indian government data, between 2016 and 2018, there were 1,025 Chinese transgressions into Indian territory.¹³ The military tensions between them peaked in May-June 2020 when a “sizeable number” of Chinese troops entered Eastern Ladakh.¹⁴ On 15 June 2020, the Chinese also engaged in hand-to-hand fighting and killed 20 Indian army personnel with sharp weapons. At the time of writing this paper, tensions at the Ladakh LAC remained, despite the recent meeting between foreign ministers of the two countries on 10 September 2020 in Moscow. The two foreign ministers also released a joint statement in which they agreed on dialogue, disengagement and de-escalation of tensions.¹⁵

On the other hand, there is growing bonhomie between India and the US. One can get a sense about official relations between India and the US by reading what former Foreign Secretary and National Security Advisor of India, Shivshankar Menon, said at an online forum hosted by the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Menon said more Indians would accept “doing things with the US, for the US, that actually

¹¹ Devirupa Mitra, op cit.

¹² Nirupama Subramanian, “US signs defence pact with Maldives”, *The Indian Express*, 13 September 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/us-signs-defence-pact-with-maldives-6594295/>. Accessed on 14 September 2020.

¹³ “1025 Chinese transgressions reported from 2016 to 2018: Government data”, *The Economic Times*, 28 November 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/1025-chinese-transgressions-reported-from-2016-to-2018-government-data/articleshow/72262114.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 24 June 2020.

¹⁴ “Chinese Troops Have Come Into Eastern Ladakh in Sizeable Numbers, Says Rajnath Singh”, *The Wire*, 3 June 2020. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/china-india-border-ladakh-rajnath-singh>. Accessed on 14 September 2020.

¹⁵ Joint Press Statement - Meeting of External Affairs Minister and the Foreign Minister of China (September 10, 2020), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32962/Joint_Press_Statement_Meeting_of_External_Affairs_Minister_and_the_Foreign_Minister_of_China_September_10_2020. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

US allies would do – without an alliance.”¹⁶ He also said that “The actual practice of interoperability, of taking on particular roles and of fitting into a larger common strategy – I don’t see that being problematic today.”¹⁷

On the recent LAC row between India and China, in July 2020, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, accused China of taking, what he finds “incredibly aggressive action”.¹⁸ Almost a month later, US President Donald Trump said, “While we’re at it, we’re talking about China and India, (they) are going at it pretty good on the border, as you know. It has been very nasty.”¹⁹ He added, “And we stand ready to help, with respect to China and India.”²⁰

Looking at India’s relations with the US and China, some Indian observers and analysts find the declining India-China relations and growing India-US closeness as possible reasons for India’s support for the US-Maldives defence pact. This shift in India’s position on the pact perhaps implies the recognition of a fact that New Delhi will not be able to challenge China’s dramatic penetration of the region on its own steam and will need partners.

A day after the US and the Maldives signed the defence pact, on 11 September 2020, India and the US held a bilateral 2+2 Inter-sessional meeting in virtual mode. In that meeting, the two sides reviewed the progress and development in the areas of defence, security and foreign policy since the last such meeting held in 2019. In this meeting, the two countries also “exchanged views about regional developments, and agreed to pursue their quest for a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.”²¹

On the contrary, the Chinese media has blamed India for escalating the recent row at the LAC. They have accused India of contesting against China in Asia at the behest of the US. In an article in *Global Times*, Ai Jun wrote, “The US is treating India as its pawn to promote the Indo-Pacific strategy, contain the rising China and safeguard its global hegemony. India, on the other hand, is making use of its ties with the US to counterbalance China’s influence in Southeast Asia and as a deterrent to Pakistan.”²² On the India-China LAC border row and India’s growing closeness with the US, some Chinese scholars such as Lou Chunhao feel that

¹⁶ Matt Ho, “China-India border row: risk of tangled ties if New Delhi looks to third parties, says expert”, *South China Morning Post*, 23 September 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3102657/china-india-border-row-risk-tangled-ties-if-new-delhi-looks>. Accessed on 23 September 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Humeyra Pamuk and Jonathan Landay, “Pompeo says China took ‘incredibly aggressive action’ in recent clash against India”, *Reuters*, 8 July 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-china-usa-pompeo/pompeo-says-china-took-incredibly-aggressive-action-in-recent-clash-with-india-idUSKBN2492D7>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

¹⁹ Vishnu Som, “India-China Border Row “Very Nasty, Would Love to Help”, *NDTV*, 5 September 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-china-border-row-very-nasty-would-love-to-help-donald-trump-2290755>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “India-US hold 2 plus 2 intersessional meeting”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11 September 2020. https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32938/IndiaUS_hold_2_plus_2_intersessional_meeting. Accessed on 20 September 2020.

²² Ai Jun, “India knows US won’t help it achieve its goals”, *Global Times*, 23 June 2020. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192579.shtml>. Accessed on 20 September 2020.

“If India invites external elements into the Sino-Indian relationship, it would not only be unhelpful but make issues even more complicated.”²³

Second, there is an India-friendly government at Male which, as India believes, will not tilt too much towards China like Yameen did. This has made India welcome the US-Maldives defence pact. An Indian official told *The Hindu* that the “Indian Embassy in Male had been kept briefed about the negotiations, and had been shown a copy of the two-page document signed... Neither of those objectives [agreed in the agreement] in any way impinge on India’s role as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean, and are actually “complementary” to India’s plans for the Indo-Pacific.”²⁴ The same official added, “It is significant that the Maldives has taken a strategic position, and signed this agreement with the U.S. and not with China, despite the fact that it is part of BRI [Belt and Road Initiative].”²⁵

India-China Military Competition in the Maldives

The Maldives was not an important country for China till 2011 and it did not even have an embassy in Male before that year. After the opening of the Chinese embassy in 2011, the two countries cemented their relations. Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to the Maldives in September 2014 remarkably changed the relations between them. In December 2014, Yameen signed the China-led Maritime Silk Road connectivity project²⁶ and also became a party to the BRI. Since then China had been proactively engaged in building infrastructure and has granted huge loans to the Maldives.

In 2015, the Maldivian parliament enacted a law enabling foreigners to own land in the island nation on the condition that they would invest US\$1 billion (S\$1.35 billion) or more in projects, and 70 per cent of the project would be built on reclaimed land. This was seen by many as a move to primarily benefit China more than any other country which could buy land and set up a military base in Maldives.²⁷ The then-opposition parties of Maldives accused the Yameen government of planning to award parts of south-central Laamu Atoll to China to set up a military base.²⁸ Yameen dismissed any such concerns and claims over possible foreign military expansion under the land amendment law in the Maldives. Also, the Chinese military strategy paper of 2015 said that China did not own any military bases in foreign countries.²⁹

²³ Matt Ho, op. cit.

²⁴ Suhasini Haidar, “India welcomes US -Maldives defence agreement”, *The Hindu*, 14 September 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-welcomes-us-maldives-defence-agreement/article32601889.ece>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Devirupa Mitra, op. cit.

²⁷ Sudha Ramachandran, “The China-Maldives Connection”, *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-china-maldives-connection/>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

²⁸ Lia Xiaokun, “Land sale isn’t for military purpose, says Maldives”, *China Daily*, 25 July 2015. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-07/25/content_21404471.htm. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.

For the first time, in August 2017, three Chinese naval ships – Changchun, Jing Zhou and Chao Hu – harboured at Male City’s commercial port.³⁰ On 31 August 2017, the PLA Navy held a reception on the deck of Changchun at Male.³¹ India expressed its concern over the harbouring of these ships in Male. At that time, to allay India’s concerns, the Maldives’ then-Foreign Minister, Mohamed Asim, visited New Delhi and met India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and then-Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj.³²

Four months later, in December 2017, China and the Maldives decided to set up a Joint Ocean Observation Station which the then-Maldivian opposition leaders claimed would be used for military purposes with a provision to even set up a submarine base. The observatory was to be located at Makunudhoo.³³ With the defeat of Yameen in the 2018 presidential election, relations between China and the Maldives changed under the new President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. At present, Solih’s government is trying to get out of some of the Chinese projects agreed to by Yameen. One such project is the Makunudhoo observatory station.³⁴ Many of these agreed projects are also subject to corruption charges.³⁵

On the other hand, India-Maldives defence cooperation goes back to 1988 when, at the request of then-President Abdulla Gayoom, the government of India under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sent paratroopers to the Maldives on short notice. Hired by the Maldivian business interest group under the leadership of Abdullah Luthufi, “around 80 sea-borne armed forces landed in Malé and attempted to gain control over various key government installations, supported by some 80 others who had infiltrated the country disguised as tourists.”³⁶ Gayoom made an appeal, and on short notice, Indian paratroopers carried out ‘Operation Cactus’ to clear the Maldivian capital city of mercenaries and their supporters.³⁷ Since then, India and the Maldives have established good relations except during Yameen’s tenure.

Years later, under an agreement in 2013, India leased two military helicopters to the Maldives. Five years later, in 2018, the latter asked India to take back the two helicopters and call back its 48-member crew and support staff, as it indicated it was not in favour of

³⁰ Shan Anees, “Three Chinese naval ships arrive in Male”, *Raajje.mv*, 27 August 2017. <https://raajje.mv/16679>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

³¹ “China People’s Liberation Army Navy Holds Deck Reception at Destroyer Changchun (Hull 150)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Maldives. <http://mv.chineseembassy.org/eng/zmgx/t1503348.htm>. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

³² Sudha Ramachandran, op cit.

³³ Sachin Prashar, “China’s ocean observatory in Maldives sparks fresh security concerns”, *The Times of India*, 26 February 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chinas-ocean-observatory-in-maldives-sparks-fresh-security-fear/articleshow/63072040.cms>. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

³⁴ Jyoti Malhotra, “Taking Russia’s help on China and US on Maldives-a new India realism is underway”, *The Print*, 15 September 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/global-print/russia-help-on-china-and-us-on-maldives-new-indian-realism-is-underway/503010/>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

³⁵ Nayanima Basu, “India-first policy stays but will be friends with China too: Maldives ex-President Nasheed”, *The Print*, 15 April 2019. <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-first-policy-stays-but-will-be-friends-with-china-too-maldives-ex-president-nasheed/220816/>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

³⁶ Subrata K Mitra, Siegfried O Wolf and Jivanta Schottli (2006), *A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia*. London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, p. 218.

³⁷ Ibid.

the renewal of the lease agreement which expired in June 2018.³⁸ One of the choppers was deployed in the Maldives' southern-most island of Addu and the other in Lammu.³⁹ The main reason for this decision was India's support for the establishment of democratic order in the Maldives and release of political prisoners.⁴⁰ However, the helicopters and personnel were allowed to stay back for a few months⁴¹ after which Solih came into power and relations were normalised.

In February 2018, the Maldives declined India's invitation to participate in a 16-country mega naval exercise 'Milan', citing an emergency situation in the country⁴² where Yameen clamped down and silenced democratic voices in the country. At that time, the Maldives also took note of India's concerns on the emergency and said that the Indian government's public statement "ignore(s) the facts and ground realities with regard to the ongoing political developments in the Maldives".⁴³

The new government in the Maldives, which took over in 2018, discovered that the country was under severe debt mainly due to the inflow of large Chinese investments and loans under Yameen. To ease the situation, during Solih's visit to New Delhi in December 2018, India announced a US\$1.4 billion (S\$1.9 billion) loan to the Maldives to pay off its debt to China. This was seen by many commentators and media persons as a pay-off to establish an Indian military base in the Maldives – a point that was refuted by the Maldives' Foreign Minister, Abdulla Shahid.⁴⁴

During his visit to the Maldives in June 2019, Modi and Solih released a joint statement which mentioned naval cooperation between the two countries. Solih reaffirmed his government's 'India-First Policy'. The two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Hydrography and a Technical Agreement on Sharing White Shipping Information between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force.⁴⁵

³⁸ Manash Pratim Bhuyan, "Thaw in India-Maldives Ties? Military helicopters set to stay back", *The Week*, 27 August 2018. <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2018/08/27/thaw-india-maldives-ties-military-helicopters.html>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Sanjiv Miglani, "Maldives seeks scaling back of Indian presence as it woos China", *Reuters*, 10 August 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-maldives-idUSKBN1KV13S>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Maldives says it declined India's invitation for Milan 2018 naval exercise because of State of Emergency", *Firstpost*, 28 February 2018. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/maldives-says-it-declined-indias-invitation-for-milan-2018-naval-exercise-because-of-state-of-emergency-4370195.html>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

⁴³ "The Government of Maldives calls for dialogue; public statements unhelpful", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Maldives. <https://www.foreign.gov.mv/index.php/en/mediacentre/news/4354-the-government-of-maldives-calls-for-dialogue-public-statements-unhelpful>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

⁴⁴ "Maldives dismisses reports of Indian military base in Malé in return for \$1 billion aid", *The Times Now News.Com*, 30 November 2018. <https://www.timesnownews.com/international/article/maldives-india-relationship-abdulla-shahid-china-ties-dismisses-reports-of-indian-military-base-in-male-in-return-for-1-billion-dollar-aid-president/323408>. Accessed on 15 December 2018.

⁴⁵ "India-Maldives Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31418/indiamaldives+joint+statement+during+the+state+visit+of+prime+minister+to+maldives>. Accessed on 20 September 2020.

To carry out humanitarian relief work, India has also agreed to gift Dornier helicopters to the Maldives. An agreement for this was signed in 2016 between India and the Maldives during the visit of the then-Maldivian Minister of Defence, Adam Shareef, to New Delhi.⁴⁶

‘India Out’ Campaign in the Maldives

The Solih government’s relations and its policies towards India are largely opposed by the Maldivian opposition parties. To mark their protests, they launched an ‘India Out’ campaign. On 28 August 2020, the Maldives’ opposition coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives and the People’s National Congress held a number of rallies across the island country to protest what they call “selling off Maldives” to India.⁴⁷ On that day, there was also massive fire in a high rise building, half of whose floors are occupied by the State Bank of India.⁴⁸ A police investigation is on-going to find out whether this was due to technical reasons or sabotage.⁴⁹

Ali Azim, leader of the parliamentary group of the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party, has accused China of secretly funding the ‘India Out’ campaign to stir the Maldives’ domestic politics.⁵⁰ This charge has been, however, denied by China’s Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong. In a tweet, Lizhong said, “The non-interference policy of China is time-tested and well observed, it won’t change because of anyone making untrue claims or trying to drag us into local party game.”⁵¹

The opposition parties have also made claims about the presence of foreign, especially Indian, troops in the Maldives, which is a threat to any country’s sovereignty. They claim that the Indian military personnel will soon arrive in northern Hanimaadho island and Haa Dhaalu Atoll.⁵² They put up posters in parts of the country depicting uniformed Indian soldiers holding Indian flags on the Maldivian islands.⁵³ All such claims have been refuted by the head of the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), Major General Abdulla Shamaal. In a press conference, Shamaal said that those foreign personnel, particularly Indian ones, who are in the Maldives, are there to help the country and the helicopters gifted by India are under the command and control of the MNDF.⁵⁴ He mentioned that the foreign personnel are currently operating these helicopters as there are no local pilots specialised in the field. The Indian officers, Shamaal said, have been overseeing the maintenance and

⁴⁶ Shahudha Mohamed, “Maldives to acquire Dornier aircraft contracted in Yameen government”, *The Edition*, 24 July 2020. <https://edition.mv/news/18081>. Accessed on 15 September 2020.

⁴⁷ Devirupa Mitra, “After Fire at SBI and Anti-India Protests, Maldives Beefs up Security for Indian High Commission”, *The Wire*, 29 August 2020. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/maldives-india-high-commission-anti-india-protests>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “Ambassador: China will not get dragged into ‘local party game’”, *Sunonline*, 7 September 2020. <https://en.sun.mv/62826>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² N Sathiya Moorthy, “Maldives: Nasheed, Yameen competing to hurt Solih, India?”, *South Asia Journal*, 11 September 2020. <http://southasiajournal.net/maldives-nasheed-yameen-competing-to-hurt-solih-india/>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Shahudha Mohamed, “Chief of Defence denies foreign military presence in Maldives”, *The Edition*, 6 September 2020. <https://edition.mv/news/18964>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

refuelling of those helicopters.⁵⁵ Shamaal added that since the Indian Ocean is an important region for the world, the US, Saudi Arabia, China, Pakistan and the United Kingdom also provide military aid to improve the capacity of the Maldivian defence forces.⁵⁶

To counter claims made by the opposition parties in their 'India Out' smear campaign, some cabinet ministers of the Maldives have taken positions.⁵⁷ Abdulla Shahid said that those "unable to stomach" India-Maldives ties are resorting to criticism.⁵⁸ The former president and current speaker of the Maldivian parliament, Mohamed Nasheed, posted a tweet in Dhivehi language,⁵⁹ saying that "the sovereignty and independence of [the] Maldives has been maintained over the years due to India-Maldives relations... Maldivians will find prosperity only through nurturing the friendship between both countries... President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and cabinet members of main-ruling Maldivian Democratic Party are working to maintain the relationship between both countries".⁶⁰

The 'India Out' campaign has also been gaining traction because of an internal feud within the MDP-led government. Nasheed has alleged corruption in the finance and economic development ministries.⁶¹ He pointed at two of his party ministers, Ibrahim Ameer (Finance) and Fayyaz Ismail (Economic Development). Ameer denied any corruption charges, and in a tweet asked, "Amid this internal rivalry, aren't we calling each other thieves and destroying ourselves?"⁶²

Unfolding the tensions within the government further, a member of parliament, on condition of anonymity, told *The Hindu*, "The Speaker [Nasheed] has also been pushing for a parliamentary system. There is concern within the government that his moves might undermine the President, who is trying to work with the coalition partners."⁶³ He added, "Be it on the economy, or on democracy, our government hasn't been able to deliver much yet and the pandemic has made it worse. At such a time, the tensions within may prove damaging."⁶⁴

Conclusion

India-Maldives relations have overwhelmingly transformed under the Solih government. Simultaneously, there has been a growing assertion of China in the Indo-Pacific region and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Nasheed attributes prosperity, independence to India-Maldives relations", *Avas MV*, 3 September 2020. <https://avas.mv/en/88305>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

⁵⁸ Meera Srinivasan, "Maldives defends ties with India", *The Hindu*, 16 September 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-defends-ties-with-india/article32623408.ece>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

⁵⁹ Mohamed Nasheed, Twitter, 2 September 2020. <https://twitter.com/MohamedNasheed/status/1301152971305091072>. Accessed on 17 September 2020.

⁶⁰ "Nasheed attributes prosperity, independence to India-Maldives relations", op. cit.

⁶¹ N Sathiya Moorthy "Maldives: Nasheed, Yameen competing to hurt Solih, India?", ORF, 10 September 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/maldives-nasheed-yameen-competing-to-hurt-solih-india/>. Accessed on 16 September 2020.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Meera Srinivasan, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

South Asia. Of late, India has perhaps accepted the fact that it cannot alone deter China so it is better to cooperate with someone who can help do it. This is perhaps why India has welcomed the recent US-Maldives defence pact. However, India has to be cautious, as free navigation of American naval ships may contract India's own naval presence in South Asia.

India has also welcomed the US-Maldives defence deal due to the presence of an India-friendly government in Male. However, India has to keep a very close eye on the on-going developments in the Maldives. India has to be very cautious about the 'India Out' campaign in the Maldives. Looking at the recent political history of the country, one finds that opposition parties started with anti-government campaigns, mobilised huge public support, and eventually forced out or democratically defeated the ruling party or coalition. An essential part of all such changes has been rifts within the government of the day. At present, a rift is emerging within the Solih-led government, mainly due to an "over-enthusiastic" and "over-ambitious" Nasheed. In the long term, this may prove dangerous to the Maldivian government. In such a situation, to protect its interests, the best thing India can do is to also engage with other ministers of the government, as it does with Nasheed. Any such engagements must not affect Nasheed's political position, as he is very important for India-Maldives relations.

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