

STRENGTHENING INDIA'S STRATEGIC DEPTH IN THE SHALLOW WATERS OF MALDIVES

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Abstract

This article looks into the challenges and opportunities facing India, particularly on its maritime security domain. It analyses the increased strategic cooperation between India and Maldives in the Indian Ocean region and how it will be mutually beneficial for both the nations on strengthening their security, countering piracy and terrorism and help economic development. It also analyses how India is strategically well poised vis-a-vis China in the region, to thwart any Chinese supremacy through the so called 'string of pearls.' India's relations with the Maldives have always been excellent and the maritime dimension offers greater prospects for trust-building through cooperation and mutual benefit. For India, the strategic and investment priorities undertaken with Maldives will better enable success at present.

Keywords: Indian Ocean region, Indian Navy, Maldives, security, piracy, terrorism, strategic cooperation

The Maldives is more than just pristine beaches and cocktail venues, and there are enough signs it will be proved right sooner than later. Though its location is at a vantage point in strategic parlance, Maldives had never been a part of any military alliance in international affairs even during the Cold War period. The United States base at the Diego Garcia had reduced its reliance on Maldives and the island nation had consistently denied requests from the regional powers for any kind of military base, even refusing refuelling facilities for the ships in one of their islands. This has to be seen in the context of two compelling reasons.

Firstly, it is their resolve to maintain the policy of non-alignment, which facilitated in deriving the most possible benefit and assistance for its well being from the international community, antagonising none. After giving independence to Maldives in 1965, the British maintained their Royal Air Force base (which was earlier a Royal Navy base until 1957) in the Gan atoll of the archipelago till they vacated the facility in 1976 prematurely (they had a lease agreement till 1986), in line with its new policy of abandoning defence commitments east of the Suez Canal. Though the international media carried news that this facility was available for lease after the British withdrawal, it was not true and the Maldivian authorities maintained a diligent policy of non-alignment regarding this facility, eventually turning off a million dollar offer from the erstwhile USSR to be used for their "fishing vessels".² Even after the end of the Cold War, Maldives didn't contemplate letting any regional or world power to utilise their islands for military activities.

Secondly, given its inherent vulnerabilities in the form of its geographic structure, lack of natural resources and economic disadvantages – where everything had to be imported except for fish, coconuts and some variety of melons, they had always maintained good relations with its neighbours, including regional and world powers. This eventually helped them to avail economic assistance from both the blocks during and after the Cold War. They had also been an active member of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) and a prominent face in the league of the Alliance Of Small Island States (AOSIS), which spearheads in highlighting the problems of small island states on the issues of environmental degradation and economic problems for decades.

Significance of the Indian Ocean region

The words of the famous naval strategist Alfred Mahan once again comes to prominence and shows the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, where he states ‘whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the 21st century the destiny of the world would be decided on its waters.’³ Mahan stressed the interdependence of the military and commercial control of the sea and asserted that the control of seaborne commerce can determine the outcome of wars. This assumption holds reality, where the Indian Ocean is coming into prominence in the international affairs for various reasons. The Indian Ocean has exceptionally important economic, political and strategic significance not only for those inhabiting this region but also the whole world. The area of the Indian Ocean is rich in several important minerals, raw materials and marine foods and has been long regarded as one of world’s major store house of natural resources. The importance of the Indian Ocean tremendously enhances in view of the large oil-bearing regions on its coast. Important commercial lanes lie across the Indian Ocean which functions as the main connecting link between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean; the routes passing through it connect Europe and East Africa with South and South East Asia, Far East and Australia. Throughout history, dominance of the Indian Ocean has been a critical factor in defining a nation’s supremacy and power. The Indian Ocean provides a useful synthesis of many of the key issues in world history such as colonialism, trade and spread of cultures and religions.

Given its strategic importance and the emerging competition between the regional powers, the vast Indian Ocean and its contiguous waters present a wide range of security issues. The Indian Ocean is also located at the crossroads of terrorism originating from ‘two banks’ to its west and east that are hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism, thus making it a *de-facto* ‘lake of jihadi terrorism’⁴. Moreover, convergence of security interests between the two major regional powers could be ruled out due to the Indo-Pak discord which has been testified by the recent MV Suez episode involving both the navies. Adding to these non-conventional threats is the increasing maritime piracy on sea-lines and hub-ports enclosed within the commercial corridors of the littoral states. Given the established links of some regional groups like the Somalian pirates, with global terror groups like Al-Qaida, security concerns for the Indian Ocean littorals are running high. Links between terrorism and piracy came to foreground when reports emerged in February 2011, that Somali pirates have reached a multi-million-dollar deal with Islamic militants, allowing them a cut of future ransom payouts in return for anchorage at Harardhere, a port controlled by *al-Shabaab* (The Youth) fighters - a militant Islamic group in Somalia that has close links with Al-Qaida. US officials had

estimated the annual turnover of ransom payouts to Somali pirates to be more than US\$60 million (\$59.8m) - a conservative estimate limited by confidentiality clauses in shipping insurance agreements⁵. Thus, a large sum of ransom is being doled out funding terrorism. The distinct possibility of WMDs falling in the hands of terrorists due to theft of vessels ferrying such material, further add to the threat. Besides, one cannot ignore sea borne terror as has been witnessed during the 2008 Mumbai attack. Containerisation of sea-borne trade and resort to Flags of Convenience (FoC) shipping by non-state elements, compound the threats. Adding to that is the narcotics trade, criss-crossing from the 'Golden Crescent' involving Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan⁶. Smuggling drugs from Afghanistan to Maldives using the routes of Trivandrum and Tuticorin has seen an upward trend. Drug trafficking leads to money laundering and funds from the sale of drugs are funnelled towards gun-running, insurgent and terrorist activities. Add to these the trans-national security concern linked to human smuggling that has multiple effects, ranging from fuelling terrorism to illegal immigration causing socio-political instability.

India's interests in the Indian Ocean is not only limited to its strategic dimensions, but also linked to its maritime trade - 95 per cent in volume. It is currently the world's sixth largest oil consumer and is expected to become the fifth largest by 2020. The oil sea-route originating from the region will continue to be valued by India despite improvements in indigenous production, diversification and recourse to nuclear/non-conventional sources. The sea-lines connecting the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden to East Asia pass close to India; the eight/nine-degree channels adjacent to the Lakshadweep dominate the entrance to the Malacca Straits. It is thus, imperative for India to address and to evolve a cooperative regime in the maritime security of the Indian Ocean.

This was aptly recognised as early as a decade ago by the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who made the following statement on India's strategic priorities during the Combined Commanders' Conference in November 2003:

...the strategic frontiers of today's India, grown in international stature, have expanded well beyond confines of South Asia...Our security environment ranges from Persian Gulf to Straits of Malacca across the Indian Ocean, includes Central Asia and Afghanistan, China...and South-East Asia. Our strategic thinking has also to extend to these horizons.⁷

Commensurate with this observation and on the backdrop of recent developments like piracy and seaborne terrorism, India has now taken the role of a leader in its sphere of influence using its naval capabilities. The Indian Navy is helping the Maldives, the Seychelles and Mauritius to tackle piracy and it has become increasingly important to secure these island territories, especially the ones that are uninhabited which could be used by the terrorists. India has initiated the process of putting viable cooperative mechanisms to harness the collective strength of states to secure the maritime domain in its vicinity. Consequently, it has beefed up its defence cooperation with Maldives commendably in recent years. With these increased defence cooperation combined with prudent economic assistance, it is pertinent to ask, what are the compulsions for India to take a pro-active role with regard to Maldives? How will it be useful for its strategic designs? And finally, what are the consequences?

The need to foster cooperation in the Indian Ocean region

After the 2008 Mumbai 26/11 attack, the defence community took cognizance of the need to seal the permeability of India's coastal security apparatus. This had also been borne out from the realisation that security is indivisible from economic considerations too, where emphasis on protecting metropolitan concentrations especially through the creation or relocation of new special or elite forces had been given priority. Though there had been proposals to modernize and strengthen the coast guards even before the Mumbai attack, the need for urgent implementation was realized only after 26/11. Protecting the coastal cities from terrorist attacks is not possible unless India safeguard its territorial waters with effective surveillance and intelligence system put in place. Maritime terrorism would possibly manifest through the seizure of an LNG carrier to be used as a 'floating bomb' that could be rammed into another vessel or detonated at a target port; or the deliberate destruction of a cruise liner to cause mass casualties⁸. These ships are characterised by relatively poor pre-departure screening and remain particularly vulnerable to post-departure interception on the high seas. As a security expert puts in, it is impossible to contain terrorism permanently at its points of delivery. It is necessary to deal with the networks of terrorism wherever they exist, and, eventually, to neutralize its sources. Otherwise, the dictum of the Irish Republican Army will inevitably apply, which states: 'You have to be lucky all the time; we have to be lucky just once.' This scenario prompted the defence establishment in India to ponder over the possibilities of putting in place an effective foolproof network on its waterfront areas and high seas to safeguard its national interests.

At the domestic level, it resulted in the formation of the coastal police stations with the help and coordination of coastal state governments in the coastal areas. The Coast Guard had been roped in along with the marine police stations for coastal security within 12 nautical miles of the coastline as well. Earlier, the Indian Coast Guard used to look after the coastal security only beyond 12 nautical miles. The force levels of the Coast Guard are also being doubled and the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) is manufacturing 12 Dornier aircraft for the force. India is setting up 38 static radars across the country and it will be commissioned by November 2011. Adding to that, India is planning to upgrade the existing airfield at Minicoy as a full-fledged one, capable of taking on bigger aircraft, by April 2012⁹. The eight degree channel between the Maldives and Minicoy witnesses traffic to the tune of 40 large ships a day, and here piracy is a major concern not only for the transiting vessels but also for the Indian security establishment in situations like the recent one, where a small group of Somali pirates landed on the coast of Gujarat travelling close to the route the Mumbai terrorist attackers took¹⁰. Meanwhile, to tackle the menace of piracy, the Indian government is about to bring in a new anti-piracy law shortly. The Indian Piracy Bill will empower the Navy to act against piracy anywhere in the world. The new bill will also allow Indian courts to prosecute pirates, who, right now, are prosecuted by the Indian courts only under associated offences, not piracy. Minicoy, the southernmost island in the Arabian Sea is of prime strategic importance and therefore, strengthening of the Coast Guard on the archipelago is an important step towards ensuring swift and effective response to any fast developing security challenge at sea. The Coast Guard is also planning to commission a new station at Androth (Lakshadweep) with berthing and refuelling facilities and waterfront, so that big ships could be positioned there. The Indian Navy

too is in midst of putting in place a combined security grid by installing a number of radars throughout its vast coastal region for effective real time information gathering and surveillance.

At the external level, India decided to increase its naval surveillance capabilities in the high seas on the Indian Ocean, where the possibility of terrorist attacks could emanate from and also putting in place of a well coordinated mechanism to safeguard its territorial waters from intruders. Combined with this is the necessity, to safeguard its vital economic interest on the high seas - commercial sea lanes and cargos, to commensurate with its role and status of a growing economic giant. More than 65 per cent of India's crude oil needs, which acts as the catalyst for its economic growth, are imported by sea; and oil tankers represent the weakest link in the oil chain. An oil tanker could have a length of a quarter of a kilometer and a normal speed of 14 knots an hour. A small boat, in comparison, travels at 70 knots an hour. Short of shooting and sinking the boat, the tankers are sitting ducks in the vicinity of impending terrorist/pirate attacks and thereby damaging its economic interests.¹¹

In short, India was concerned that it is vital to protect the sea lanes for its economic and strategic objectives to materialise. Accordingly, the importance of cooperation with the Maldivians comes into prominence, wherein mutual assistance generates mutual benefits. The geographical structure of the Maldives itself poses numerable hurdles for its security, where the distance from Male' to the outlying atolls are great and covers large stretches of open sea, making it hard to monitor movement in these areas. Straddling some crucial sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, Maldives is the cynosure of several countries vying for a foothold in the region in the recent times for various compelling reasons. Lately, Maldives is gaining the attention of major world powers too, particularly the United States. On his way to Sri Lanka, Mr. Robert Blake Jr., the Assistant Secretary for Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, visited Maldives in April 2011, the second such official visit in four months, against the backdrop of increasing radicalisation of the Maldivian youths. Earlier, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, who was on a whirl-wind visit of the major capitals of Asia and Africa in January, held discussions with officials and civil society leaders in Maldives¹². Specific areas of concerns raised with the Maldivian government by Steinberg - who was then the acting Secretary of State in Hillary Clinton's absence - included the challenges of economic development, the need to strengthen education and build educational opportunities, and more importantly the challenge of confronting growing religious extremism. These high profile US official visits have only increased the important role of Maldives on the ongoing war on terror. This is particularly significant post the killing of Osama bin Laden and the ongoing operations against the *jihadi* forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where they could try to escape to other venues possibly to the uninhabited islands of Maldives. So, it is only sensible on part of India to create a cooperative structure for securing relevant national interests.

Advantages of cooperation with Maldives

This cooperative mechanism has two advantages which is mutual in its outcomes. First, it serves the purpose of consolidating India's position in the Indian Ocean region and also ensures to be a reliable partner for the security of the Maldivian state, which lacks proper personnel, technology, equipment and finance to safe guard its vast scattered islands spread over 500 miles from both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Secondly, it serves the economic interests of Maldives enormously by safeguarding its marine resources from poaching. This is of great significance given the fact that fishing being the mainstay of Maldivian economy and there are at least 2,500 Maldivians engaged in fishing activities in its territorial waters on any given day.

Nevertheless, three major reasons could be attributed for India's assistance to Maldives. They are:

1. Extension of Indian military and economic influence in the South Asian region
2. Achieving and maintaining a strategic balance with China on the Indian Ocean region
3. Curtailing possible Chinese influence on Maldives, thereby pre-empting the further strengthening of the Chinese strategy of forming "string of pearls".

India and Maldives has joined hands to keep the seas in their sphere of influence free from unwanted visitors such as pirates, interlopers and drug runners. The Maldivians have understood the importance of cooperation with Indian security apparatus and they are more than willing to do so. This was emphatically put on by Mr. Ahmed Naseem at the end of his first visit to India in April 2011 as Maldives Foreign Minister. He said, "with Somali pirates getting closer, we have deep concern and are working closely with India in preventing any unwarranted incident. We have a surveillance programme to monitor fishing vessels but the point is we have to work in cooperation with the Coast Guards so that they increasingly exchange information on the movement of suspicious vessels". This holds true in the context of the merchant ships increasing their distance from Somalia in search of 'safer' transport routes and the pirates following in pursuit proving that the predator always follow the prey, resulting in attacks much farther east from the Gulf of Aden than ever before, thus intruding into the Indian and Maldivian waters. The emerging cooperation follows the realisation that sanitation of the waters around the Maldives is vital for securing the Indian coast. "If you cannot defend the Maldives, you cannot defend the Indian soft belly, you cannot defend peninsular India. Recently you found your threats materialising from the sea (Mumbai attacks). Strengthening the security of Maldives is very, very important for everybody," the Maldives President said highlighting the need for cooperation¹³. He also reiterated that Indian assistance was instrumental in the Maldives beefing up its surveillance and patrolling capability.

Indo-Maldives relations

India has always been more receptive to the demands of the Maldivian government of its security needs. The best example is the flying of the Indian Air Force squadrons and the Indian Navy interceptor vessel on receiving a distress call from Maldives, to thwart the attempted coup on the Maldivian government in 1988 by the Sri Lankan mercenaries. The threat of mercenaries has plagued the Maldivian security system ever since. It is evident that the small island territories are particularly vulnerable to aggression by mercenaries, terrorists and even pirates. The arms dealers and the mercenaries could still occupy some of the islands for some time, complete their transactions and then move on¹⁴. The farther most islands hold these kinds of threat scenario unabated. To strengthen its security, Maldivian authorities requested for a patrol craft from the Indian

government, to perform multiple tasks such as patrolling the exclusive economic zone and taking action against non-state actors. Taking cognizance of the urgent nature of this request, India decommissioned one of its ships from the Indian Navy and transferred it to Maldives in April 2006. While transferring the ship, the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee said that "the transfer of Indian naval ship 'Tillanchang' to Maldives was to ensure an atmosphere of peace, stability and tranquility in the region so that both countries could attend to socio-economic development free from external interference".¹⁵ This was in line with India's stated position vis-à-vis its neighbours, as the former Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, during her visit to Maldives in 1975 said that India did not subscribe to the concept of big and small nations, and would always use its strength to promote peace and help neighbours and friendly countries. Indian military personnel too reflected the same notion even after three and a half decades as was evident from the statement of the Indian Navy Chief Admiral Nirmal Verma, who said India has no intention of playing a 'headmaster's role' in the Indian Ocean Region.¹⁶ The transfer of 'Tillanchang', a major military assistance after 1988, was part of the cooperation between the two nations in the fight against terrorism, piracy and smuggling under the broad framework of United Nations conventions. The Indian Navy also took the responsibility of assisting Maldives in maintaining the ship in its lifetime. Though India helps Maldives in upgrading its security, ties between the two were not uni-dimensional but also encompass economic, cultural and educational fields, which have lot of scope for further development.

India has always been sensitive to the security needs of Maldives, a real source of strength indeed; and the later too has utmost regard to India's security sensitivities. Maldives does not have the "Indophobia", rather it trusts India's assurance to respect its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is also because of the pragmatic approach and realisation on part of Maldives arising out of its geopolitical compulsions, which is not endowed with the strength to counter the moves and temptations of any powerful state to flex its muscles. Much of the context for evolving a mutually beneficial relationship is provided by the tension-free socio-historical settings under which both India and Maldives interact,¹⁷ unlike India's relations with its other SAARC neighbours which are mired in ethno-religious socio-cultural tensions, border disputes, etc. The introvert foreign policy pursued by the then President Amir Ibrahim Nazir (1968-78), was replaced by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978-2008), who articulated his country's security needs at the international stage fearlessly. The present regime under Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed (2008 onwards), who was elected by the first free and fair democratic election held in the archipelago, has been following a pragmatic and pro-active on its security needs. After being elected as President, Nasheed said that he would be setting up a "sovereign fund" to buy home land for his people, in case the effects of global warming and sea-level rise causes the country to disappear. One of the possible places, he said, would be India due to socio-cultural ties. It is a testimony of Maldives' trust and confidence in its neighbour and the cordial relationship it has developed sans the hysteria of "Indophobia".

In the past, Maldives did not have any specific bilateral treaties/agreements on military cooperation and thus does not want to have a dependent relationship for its security needs on any other country. It is for this reason; it has always advocated multi-lateral approach for its security needs using the good offices of the UN, NAM, AOSIS, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), etc or regional approach through SAARC. But

this has been changing in recent times with Maldives signing bilateral agreements with India. Maldives has also stepped up its bilateral interaction with many countries lately, on military, diplomatic and economic relationships. In May, the Turkish Naval ship '*TCG Giresun*' came to Maldives on a three day visit as part of an anti-piracy initiative. In June, the French Naval ship '*FS Mistral*' docked in the Maldivian waters as part of a training deployment.¹⁸ This was followed by the visit of China's top legislator, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) Wu Bangguo, who assured increased support for infrastructural development. This was the first time that a highest ranking Chinese official visiting Maldives, which shows its importance in the region.¹⁹ These developments are not of dependent nature, rather one of inter-dependence. As noted earlier, threats due to terrorism, piracy, environment and economic vulnerability are the main driving force in this new found pragmatic approach of Maldives.

Maritime security cooperation

In its quest to become a strong regional player, India has started exercising its role to its potential by forming closer ties with the littoral states in the Indian Ocean. The maritime element of security is helping India to form extra-regional links. India – Maldives relation has been witnessing an increased cooperation on various fronts and the military strategic relationship stands out distinctively. Cooperation to enhance mutual security formed an important component of bilateral relations between the two nations, which also helps in the stability of the region. In 2009, the Maldivian authorities approached New Delhi over fears that one of its island resorts could be taken over by terrorists given its lack of military assets and surveillance capabilities. Based on this, there were reports in the media that both the countries would be signing a number of agreements during the visit of India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony to Maldives, for strengthening mutual cooperation on security. Some of the possible agreements touted were; that, India will permanently base two helicopters in the Maldives to enhance its surveillance capabilities and ability to respond swiftly to threats. India will also help set up radars on all of its 26 atolls for seamless coverage of approaching vessels and aircraft and would be networked with the Indian coastal radar system. The radar chains of the two countries will be interlinked and a central control room in India's Coastal Command will get a seamless radar picture. In addition, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) will carry out regular Dornier sorties over the island nation to look out for suspicious movements or vessels.

While the two countries already have a security cooperation agreement against sea-borne terrorism and piracy, the framework of a detailed agreement to include Maldives into the Indian coastal security grid was drawn up during a low-key visit to the island nation in June 2009 by the then National Security Advisor M K Narayanan and the then Defence and Foreign Secretaries Vijay Singh and Shivshankar Menon. It was conceived to be an exclusive security arrangement with India and the island nation will not approach other regional countries for similar agreements. The driving force behind these developments was triggered largely by fears of a hostage crisis in Maldives whose economy is driven largely by tourism. The worst threat scenario drawn up by the Maldives government was the takeover of a remote island resort by a terrorist group or a successful terrorist attack on any one of the cruise ships visiting Maldives,

resulting in a catastrophic number of casualties and threatening the economic viability of the entire nation.²⁰ But concerns about the possible ramifications on pursuing an independent policy and sovereignty, raised by local opposition parties in Maldives had cast a shadow on the realisation of these strategic plans. Despite this imbroglio, there has been improved cooperation on other strategic security needs.

Increased Strategic Cooperation

As noted earlier, besides transferring the fast attack craft '*Tillanchang*' to Maldives, a large number of officers of the armed forces of the island nation are given training regularly in various officers training academies in India. The Indian Army also conducts a joint exercise '*Ekuevrin*' (meaning friends) with the Maldivian National Defence Forces (MDNF) from 2007 on counter-terrorism.²¹ The MNDF officials acquired some of the Indian Army's invaluable operational experience through this training. This helps foster military-to-military cooperation and enhanced inter-operability, as against the 1988 operation undertaken to thwart the coup attempt, where the military used only a tourist book map of the island nation for their operations in the absence of a detailed one.²² It is to be noted here that the challenge was not to just remain alert or reactive to given situations but to be pro-active in dealing with disruptive forces like pirates, poachers and terrorists. The effective implementation of the combined Indian Navy - MNDF exercises, hydrographic surveys, integrated surveillance and coordinated patrolling would address the security concerns of both the countries phenomenally. The Indian Coast Guard conducts an exercise on maritime rescue operations and patrolling of seas around Maldives called '*Dosti*' (meaning friendship). These joint operations are highly valuable for the MNDF in facing the modern challenges of terrorism, poaching, piracy, etc. Besides, Military teams from Maldives are also visiting the tri-services Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC) to observe how India manages security and surveillance of the critical island chain. Maldivian security personnel are also undergoing training at the Karnataka Police Academy in the Indian State of Karnataka on regular basis. In April 2010, India provided the '*Dhruv*' helicopter manufactured by HAL re-painted with Maldivian flag and a sign saying MNDF. This was a result of India's commitment to deliver security equipments to Maldives according to its requirements. India also undertook a refit work of the Maldivian Coast Guard Ship '*Huravee*' of the MNDF and delivered it in February 2010. '*Huravee*' has greatly enhanced the defence capabilities of Maldives at high seas and it had played a key role earlier in confronting an LTTE vessel and taking it into control.²³ The ship had also played a vital role in search and rescue operations and saving a number of public lives in the island nation.

Strengthening its presence on international waters, India has also established a new listening post that has begun operations in northern Madagascar. The monitoring station gathers intelligence on foreign navies operating in the region by linking with similar facilities in Mumbai and Kochi located on India's west coast and which are the headquarters of the India navy's western and southern commands, respectively. This station is India's first in the southern Indian Ocean and is significant due to the increasing oil traffic going round the Cape of Good Hope off South Africa via the Mozambique Channel. India has also set up a monitoring facility at an island it has leased from Mauritius situated to the east of Madagascar.²⁴ The defence agreement with the Maldives only strengthens these initiatives.

The development of interoperability in exercises with foreign navies offers the Indian Navy an important tool in security operations. These exercises assist in developing skills for joint operations to address problems related to piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking, and the smuggling of arms and people. Interoperability has also facilitated institutionalized cooperative naval exercises with the navies of the United States (Malabar Series), Russia (Indra Series), France (Varuna Series), U.K. (Konkan Series), Australia, Oman, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Singapore and coordinated patrols with Indonesia and Thailand. The Milan series of multinational exercises, held since 1991, was conceptualized to foster closer cooperation and address issues of maritime security among the navies of countries in India's extended neighborhood of South East Asia and as far away as Australia and New Zealand.²⁵ India has plugged an important missing cog in its defence structure in the Indian Ocean by channelising Indian Navy's capabilities to foster lasting strategic security cooperation with the Maldives. This is only the beginning of the valuable partnership, which will prove critical in validating India's strategic depth in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Navy's viability

The 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review noted that "India's military capabilities are rapidly improving through increased defense acquisitions, and they now include long-range maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction and patrolling, air interdiction, and strategic airlift. India has already established its worldwide military influence through counter-piracy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts. As its military capabilities grow, India will contribute to Asia as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond".²⁶ Commensurate to that, the Indian Navy is currently the largest and the most balanced navy in the region and the ongoing cooperative process only promises to make it more potent. The naval component of a nation's military strength possesses distinct advantages, not available to the other services. Besides war fighting, the other two roles, viz., policing and diplomacy, form the triad supporting the *raison d'être* of a nation's navy.²⁷ This makes clear the rationale behind the increased maritime cooperation between India and Maldives. Unlike the army, the Indian government avoided involving its navy in UN peacekeeping or multinational coalitions. This all changed drastically with the Indian Navy's supportive role in thwarting the attempted *coup d'état* on Maldivian government on 3rd November 1988, involving in peacekeeping operations in Somalia in 1992 (the first ever naval involvement in a UN mission). These developments augmented the Indian Navy's growing credibility in the region. The request from Mauritius for surveillance of its EEZ, that of Mozambique for Indian Navy ships to secure its maritime frontiers during the African Union (AU) Summit at Maputo in July 2003 and again in June 2004 for the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting and the fourth Africa- Caribbean-Pacific Heads of State Summit are initial indicators of acceptance of such credibility from the international community.²⁸

Multilateral anti-piracy and counter terrorism exercises are fast gaining importance in the Indian Navy's operational planning and India's previous successes in these kinds of operations are commendable valuable asset in its current scheme of things. Some of the successful operations of the Indian Navy are; the 1988 interception of the fleeing Sri Lankan mercenaries' ship from Maldives and rescuing a Maldivian cabinet minister onboard, releasing the Japanese-owned MV Alondra Rainbow from a group of

Indonesian pirates in 1999, providing naval security cover to U.S. nuclear submarines through the Strait of Malacca in 2002, and destroying the “mother-ship” of the Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 after they threatened to open fire on the Indian warship INS Tabar.²⁹ After escorting more than 1000 ships to safety from pirates in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Navy has loudly reaffirmed its commitment to secure the maritime commons in the Indian Ocean. As a rising naval power, India is taking a much broader view of its responsibility than the mere pursuit of its self interests. The Indian Navy's role in safeguarding the economic interests of the nations in the region has also met with commendable success and appreciation lately. This is evident from none other than China's positive statement issued after the Indian Navy rescued 10 Chinese sailors kept as hostages onboard a Chinese commercial ship from the Somalian pirates as recently as in April 2011. This clearly shows that China currently needs to engage with India to secure its sea lines of communications in the Indian Ocean. This also highlights the fact that China currently possesses limited power projection capability and lacks credible blue-water Navy. India would certainly benefit from this scenario; it could resolve outstanding issues on favourable terms, while seeking convergence with China on collective maritime and energy security.³⁰ India's joint naval exercise with China, the one off the coast of Shanghai in November 2003 was a ‘symbolic’ indicator of the two countries’ intent to cooperate.

Chinese conundrum on the Indian Ocean region

Nevertheless, to substantiate Indian Navy's strategic superiority, it is imperative to analyse China's capabilities on strengthening its military apparatus and the possible challenge it could pose to the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean region. In its latest budget, for the first time, China's defence expenditure (\$91.5 billion) is lower than its “public security” (internal security) expenditure (\$95.0 billion) which was tabled in the back drop of the recent Internet-spread calls for “Jasmine Revolution” protests inspired by popular democratic uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East.³¹ Along with this, China has to grapple with major leadership changes next year and also needs to focus on its two digit economic development to assuage any internal discord. On this background, it is highly impossible for China to augment its naval capabilities and to challenge India in the Indian Ocean. The infrastructural projects and ports that the Chinese are building on the so called “string of pearls” are mainly based on commercial considerations which will eventually help and sustain its two digit growth trajectory and not exclusively of military purposes. Transforming these “soft” commercial ports into “hard” naval bases is no simple task either. Ashley Townshend, an expert on international security and the Chinese military at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute for International Policy, says, “to militarise the Indian Ocean facilities, Beijing would require local air defence capabilities, munitions storage units, mine-clearing assets and a permanent military footprint. These costly renovations would probably exceed the technical, logistical and expeditionary capabilities of the Chinese military for a decade or more.” China has had little experience projecting military power abroad and its blue-water fleet remains a work in progress. Its ability to sustain far-flung naval bases would also be greatly hindered by distance and its military's cumbersome internal command structure.³²

Commercial interests and terror attacks are becoming the principal strategic determinants on the high seas. The demand for oil imports will grow despite efforts to diversify sources and any disruption of supplies due to piracy and terrorism are bound to impact severely on national economies leading to inflation and instability. As large part of China's exports of goods and imports of energy resources are passing through the Indian Ocean, combined with its lack of ability to secure its commercial interest in this vast area, India becomes crucial in its strategic maneuverings. This compels China to solicit mutual cooperation from India to safeguard its economic interests on the high seas and not to project its military might otherwise, which is already over stretched in the South China Sea. This enables India to strengthen its strategic depth in the Indian Ocean region, particularly with the kind of strategic cooperation extended to Maldives and vice versa. Recently, while on a tour of India to enhance cooperation in trade, investment, climate change, anti-piracy and security in February 2011, President Nasheed reiterated his stance on the strategic security cooperation in the Indian Ocean, saying, "Maintaining balance in the Indian Ocean is very important. There is not enough room in the Indian Ocean for other non-traditional friends".³³ Denying the reports that the Chinese are building a submarine base in Maldives, he said; Maldives is not receptive to any installation, military or otherwise, in the Indian Ocean, especially from un-traditional friends, adding "The Indian Ocean is the Indian Ocean".

Conclusion: The way forward

Today, strategic cooperation between India and Maldives is indispensable in the Indian Ocean region, based on each state's dependence on the other and optimum utilisation of their knowledge, resources and capacities. They need to pool their assets, efforts and intelligence to deter security threats through mutual cooperation with a mixture of regulations, inspections, technology transfers and deterrence and complementing global arrangements encrusted within a comprehensive defence structure. The Indo-Maldives maritime cooperation provides the much needed focus for India in improving its capacity to defend its vital interests in the Indian Ocean, as well as to reinforce its regional strategic pre-eminence.

Maldivian authorities had consistently expressed concerns over the crucial tasks of safeguarding their uninhabited islands and protecting their vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and India has been assisting this small nation, time and again to develop and enhance its maritime surveillance with aerial mobility capabilities and operational acumen. This is mainly due to the realisation on part of India that the national security concerns of Maldives cannot be de-linked from the security of the region, particularly the Indian Ocean where India has a huge stake, because security threats developing in its vicinity would have serious implications for its stability. Efficient joint mechanisms with high technological inputs should be developed and installed on a continuous basis, to hinder the capacity and capability of the pirates and terrorists to disrupt and destroy maritime enterprise, and thus ensuring peaceful use of the Indian Ocean. India's relations with the Maldives have always been excellent and the maritime dimension offers greater prospects for trust-building through cooperation and mutual benefits, which will only grow from strength to strength ensuring a non-zero-sum matrix. For India, the strategic and investment priorities undertaken with Maldives will better enable success in today's operations, while preparing for tomorrow's threats.

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