

Amid jockeying over Maldives, Washington presses for closer ties with India

By Rohantha De Silva
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As India continues to weigh the risks and advantages of a military intervention in the Maldives, a strategic Indian Ocean archipelago where China has dramatically expanded its influence in recent years, US President Donald Trump has made a public show of reaching out for closer military-security cooperation between Washington and New Delhi.

Last Thursday, the White House let it be known that Trump had telephoned Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and discussed with him the current political crisis in the Maldives, as well as developments in Myanmar, Afghanistan and North Korea. It also boasted that plans had been finalized for a new 2+2 dialogue that will bring together the countries' respective foreign and defence ministers.

According to the White House "readout" of their conversation, the fascist-minded Trump and the arch-Hindu communalist Modi "expressed concern about the political crisis in the Maldives and the importance of respect for democratic institutions and rule of law."

Claims that either leader or their governments are concerned about democracy on the Maldives are transparent lies.

US imperialism has supported, armed and sustained in office brutal right-wing regimes the world over.

For decades, India backstpped an authoritarian government in the Maldives, led by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the half-brother of the current president, Abdulla Yameen, and it continues to view Maldives as part of its sphere of regional dominance.

But Yameen, the Maldives president since a contested election in 2013, has raised New Delhi's hackles by developing close ties to China, which did not even have an embassy in Malle until 2011. Maldives is participating in China's One Belt, One Road (OBPR) infrastructure-building initiative, signed a free trade agreement with Beijing in December, and earlier last year

received three Chinese warships.

The Maldives has a population of less than half a million. But they are considered a strategic prize, because they are close to Indian Ocean shipping lanes through which much of the oil that powers the economies of India, China, Japan and other East Asian states passes, as well as much of their trade with Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

That New Delhi (and for that matter Washington) covets the Maldives for its strategic value and "democracy" is at most a flimsy pretext for a possible military intervention is readily admitted in the Indian press.

"Security concerns deserve primacy," writes S.D. Pradhan, a former chairman of India's Joint Intelligence Committee. "Whether democracy prevails in the Maldives or not, it is not India's primary aim. India cannot allow developments that go against its security and geo-political interests in its backyard."

Exiled opposition leader and former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed has been openly agitating for an Indian military intervention, citing Yameen's imposition of a state of emergency and arrest of two Supreme Court justices in response to a Supreme Court ruling February 1 overturning the criminal convictions of Nasheed and eight other opposition politicians and restoring a dozen opposition legislators to their parliamentary seats.

Yameen, who has increasingly resorted to authoritarian measures to retain power, subsequently prevailed on the remaining Supreme Court justices to overturn the Feb. 1 verdict.

Nasheed has long been seeking to win the backing of India and the western powers, including with accusations that China is engaged in a "land grab" in Maldives and denunciations of the OBOR.

He has repeatedly contrasted a reputedly benevolent India, glossing over its long support for Gayoom and

efforts to impose itself as the regional hegemon, with China, which he claims is intent on reducing the Maldives to a colony.

Nasheed's charges have been trumpeted and amplified by the Indian and western press, with many reports claiming that should the Maldives continue to be drawn into China's orbit, Beijing will establish military facilities there.

The reality is that everything they accuse Beijing of doing, Washington and New Delhi have done, are doing, and/or want to do, with the aim of expanding their control over the Indian Ocean so as to be able to strangle China economically and militarily.

In 2013, the US was pressing the Maldives to sign a Status of Forces Agreement, which would have allowed the Pentagon to use the country's ports and airbases, granted US military personnel deployed to the Maldives exemptions and immunities equal to diplomatic status, and opened the door to the building of US military facilities on the archipelago.

Last month India signed an agreement to expand its military presence in the Seychelles, where it already has a naval base. New Delhi is in the process of negotiating an agreement with Paris giving it access to France's substantial Indian Ocean military facilities and it recently signed an agreement allowing the Indian navy to use Singapore for repair and resupply. The latter agreement will greatly facilitate India's pledge to routinely patrol the strategic Malacca Strait.

Moreover India and the US collaborated in mounting a "regime change" operation in Sri Lanka. They orchestrated the defection of Maithripala Sirisena from the government of Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was deemed too close to China, and his emergence as "common opposition" candidate in the 2015 presidential election.

Thus far, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party government have said little publicly about the Maldives developments, other than to condemn Yameen's actions and refuse to meet with an envoy from his government who was tasked with explaining the purpose of its state of emergency and plans for moving forward.

However, the Indian military has let it be known that it is ready for any eventuality and the government has pointedly not ruled out a military intervention. In 1988, Indian troops intervened in the Maldives to thwart an attempted coup against Gayoom.

New Delhi did not issue any statement on last week's Modi-Trump discussion about the Maldives. But in not-for-attribution comments, the Modi government

admits it is coordinating its response with "allies," i.e. the US, Britain, and other western powers. "We are working with our close partners," one Indian official told the *Financial Times*. "Whatever we do has to be done together."

While Washington is eager to demonstrably harness India ever more tightly to its military-strategic offensive against China, New Delhi still finds it politic to maintain some pretense of "strategic autonomy" from Washington.

However, the range of issues Trump and Modi discussed underscored the extent to which India has become integrated into American imperialist strategy in the so-call "Indo-Pacific region."

Just in the past six months, India has: agreed to take on a greater role in supporting the US war in Afghanistan; actualized an agreement allowing the Pentagon to use Indian air and naval bases; lined up behind the US war threats against North Korea, including by participating in a conference in Vancouver that brought together the states that waged the Korean War under US command; and joined the so-called Quad, a strategic dialogue bringing together the US, India and Washington's closest Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Now Modi and Trump are plotting how to counter Chinese influence in the Maldives, including through a possible Indian invasion of the archipelago.

China, meanwhile, has called on the "international community" to "respect the sovereignty and independence of the Maldives" and has expressed the hope that the Maldives doesn't become another "flashpoint" in Indo-Chinese relations.

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