

Indian prime minister boosts strategic ties with the Maldives and Sri Lanka

By Rohantha De Silva
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Following his recent re-election and swearing-in, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the strategically-located Indian Ocean nations of the Maldives and Sri Lanka last weekend. The trip underlined New Delhi's increasingly aggressive pursuit of its great power interests in the region and its role as a US strategic partner against China.

Modi met with Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, addressed the parliament and signed six agreements, including defense and maritime during the trip. One of the agreements involves the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force sharing "white shipping information"—i.e., prior information about commercial shipping. Modi and Solih also inaugurated a Maldives National Defence Force training facility and Coastal Surveillance Radar System.

A joint statement by the two leaders declared that they would remain "mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region and not allowing their respective territories to be used for any activity inimical to the other."

This statement, along with Solih's reaffirmation of a so-called India First policy, reflects the sharp shift in the Maldives foreign policy following his election as president. Solih came to power last November after defeating the pro-China former President Abdul Yameen. The former Yameen administration had side-lined India while pledging support for China's Belt and Road Initiative and several Beijing-funded infrastructure projects.

India, the US and EU repeatedly criticised human rights violations by the previous Yameen government and denounced its crackdown on the opposition, including former President Mohamed Nasheed and his Democratic Party of Maldives (MDP). These

hypocritical concerns had nothing to do with defending democratic rights but were to undermine the president's pro-China policy.

Solih was elected president after behind-the-scene manoeuvres by the US and India. He immediately pledged his support for India and began dismantling several Chinese projects. His government has also launched a so-called anti-corruption drive against Yameen and his top supporters.

Modi made a brief four-hour visit to Sri Lanka last weekend where he met with President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse.

Sri Lanka is another country in South Asia where India backed a US-orchestrated regime-change operation. In January 2015, India's ruling elite endorsed the moves to oust President Rajapakse and install Sirisena as president.

The US and India were hostile to Rajapakse's close relations with Beijing, including the purchase of Chinese arms for the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and financial assistance for various projects from Beijing. The incoming Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration quickly adjusted Sri Lanka's foreign policy away from China and in favour of the US and India.

Political tensions, however, escalated between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. Late last year Sirisena attempted to sack Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replace him with Rajapakse. These moves were opposed by Washington and New Delhi, with the Sri Lanka's Supreme Court in the end forcing Sirisena to end his efforts to appoint Rajapakse.

Last weekend Modi declared his "solidarity with the Sri Lankan people" over the devastating terrorist attack on April 21. While the Sri Lankan government and the

opposition have seized on the terror attack to justify unprecedented police-state measures, sharp political infighting has erupted again between the Sirisena and Wickremesinghe-led factions.

The purpose of Modi's visit was to send another clear message to Colombo that India is determined to maintain strong military and political relations with Sri Lanka. A statement issued by Wickremesinghe's office said the Sri Lankan prime minister had held discussions with Modi on "counter-terrorism" cooperation, including more facilities for training Sri Lankan troops in combating terrorism, and expediting long-delayed Indian financed projects.

Reflecting the strategic concerns of India's political elite, an *Indian Express* article by Raja Mohan declared that Modi's "visit to Male and Colombo offers the opportunity to firmly place the Indian Ocean island states into India's regional geography... [I]sland states and territories—including the smallest pieces of real estate—are coming into strategic play amidst the return of great power rivalry to the littoral."

India, Mohan added, "needs to develop its own national capabilities—especially in the delivery of strategic economic and security assistance to the island states."

Working in tandem with Washington, New Delhi's wants to dominate the vital Indian Ocean sea lanes between Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Eighty percent of China's of oil imports are shipped through the Indian Ocean.

During the last Modi government, India opened its bases to US warplanes and ships under various logistical agreements and boosted bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral strategic cooperation with the US, and its principal regional allies, Japan and Australia. Washington and New Delhi calculate that control of critical Indian Ocean sea lanes will allow them to block key "choke points," such as Malacca Strait between Thailand and Malaysia, in any military conflict with China.

Last month, against the background of sharply rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, warships from US, Japan, Philippines and India provocatively engaged in major naval engagements in the South China Sea. Under the pretext of "freedom of navigation," six vessels provocatively passed through the area claimed by China and close to the Chinese

mainland.

Like the US, India is hostile to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. China's multi-billion project, which aims to link the Eurasian landmass, as well as Africa, both by land and sea, is to counter Washington's increasing aggressive efforts to isolate China.

As Modi toured Sri Lanka and the Maldives, India's new external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited Bhutan, India's north-eastern neighbour, and met with King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Prime Minister Lotay Tshering.

India and China were involved in a tense confrontation for 10 weeks in July–August 2017 over control of the Donglang Plateau (Doklam) near Bhutan. Both countries withdrew their troops, temporarily defusing the tensions, but none of the underlining issues were resolved. While there was no indication that Jaishankar discussed the Doklam dispute during his visit, New Delhi is determined to keep China out of Bhutan.

The Modi government's moves to strengthen its strategic relations in South Asia underline the sharpening geopolitical tensions between India and China, which are being further exacerbated by Washington's aggressive actions in Asia against Beijing.

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