

Pivot to Asia: India Bullies Maldives into Enhanced “Defence Cooperation” Pact

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Global Research, April 28, 2016

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Highlighting the strategic importance of the Maldives, a 1,190-island Indian Ocean archipelago, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Maldives’ President Abdulla Yameen have signed an “Action Plan for Defence Cooperation.”

Speaking April 11, at the conclusion of a two-day official visit to New Delhi, Yameen declared India “the most important friend of Maldives” and pledged to pursue “an India first foreign policy.” Modi, meanwhile, boasted about India’s role as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean region.

Military-security collaboration between India and the Maldives is not new. However, enhanced strategic ties between New Delhi and Male take on great importance under conditions where India is aggressively seeking to limit China’s economic and political influence in the region and integrating itself ever more completely into the US “pivot to Asia”—that is Washington’s drive to strategically encircle and prepare for war with China.

Yameen and his government have come under sharp criticism from the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) and the US and European imperialist powers for accepting large-scale Chinese investment and offers of military-security collaboration. India, albeit less publicly, has also communicated its keen displeasure to Male over its “pro-China” tilt.

Yameen’s pledges of fealty to India and the new defence cooperation agreement were clearly intended to placate New Delhi.

They came just the day before US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, announced that Washington and New Delhi have “agreed in principle” on a “logistic exchange agreement” which will enable the US military to make routine use of Indian bases and ports for resupply, repair, and rest.

By persuading the Maldives’ government to sign the Action Plan, the Modi government provided Carter, the Obama administration and the Pentagon a clear demonstration of India’s strategic heft in the region and potential as a “frontline” ally in thwarting China’s rise. For its part, the US has been urging India to press forward with its plans to develop a blue-water navy, including offering to work with it to develop and produce aircraft-carrier technology.

While details of the Action Plan are scant, a description on the Indian Ministry of External Affairs web site says that it “envisages an institutional mechanism” at the level of “Defence Secretaries to further bilateral defence cooperation.”

At his joint press conference with Yameen, Modi described the main elements of the Action Plan as development of Maldives' port facilities, continuous training and capacity-building of Maldives' police and security forces, enhanced exchange of information between the countries' security agencies, and Indian assistance in supplying Maldives with military equipment and maritime surveillance capabilities.

India has long viewed the Maldives as part of its regional sphere of influence. Its determination to act as the Maldives' principal "security-provider" has only been spiked by its ambitions to become a major power in the Indian Ocean.

Lying to India's south-west, the Maldives straddle some of the world's most important shipping lanes—including those that provide China, Japan, South Korea, and India with Mideast oil. Eight hundred miles directly south of Male lies Diego Garcia, the US's principal Indian Ocean base.

Like the western powers, India has become nervous about the growing Chinese influence in the Maldives. This has increased since MDP leader Mohammed Nasheed resigned the presidency in 2012 amid protests led by loyalists of the longtime former president Mamoon Abdul Gayoom, the current president's brother-in-law.

While the US and European powers have been exploiting the February 2015 arrest and imprisonment of Nasheed, censuring the current Maldives' government and threatening sanctions, India has used a carrot-and-stick approach to compel Male to adhere to its strategic agenda. In this, it has sought to leverage its longstanding ties to the current ruling clique. For three decades, India worked closely with Gayoom including intervening militarily in 1988 to prevent him from being overthrown.

Last year, Modi cancelled a scheduled visit to Maldives under the pretext of opposing Nasheed's jailing. From February 15 to 18 this year, India dispatched its largest and most potent warship, aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya, accompanied by destroyer INS Mysore and Tanker INS Deepak, to the Maldives.

During his joint press conference with Indian Prime Minister Modi, Yameen made statement after statement aimed at reassuring New Delhi that the current government acknowledges its regional primacy and welcomes even greater Indian involvement in Maldivian affairs.

"The security of the Maldives," declared Yameen, "is intimately linked with the security of India." He requested Modi's "assistance in strengthening government and the democratic process in the Maldives" and invited the Indian Prime Minister to make an official visit to Male this year.

For his part, Modi emphasized India's readiness to forcibly assert its interests. "India understands its responsibility as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region," said Modi. "And India is fully ready to protect its military interest in this part of the globe." Modi added that Yameen had agreed that "Maldives will be sensitive to our strategic and security interests."

In addition to the Action Plan, Modi and Yameen signed five other agreements, covering taxation, tourism, joint research and surveys, and satellite tracking.

Modi also announced that "India is ready to partner (with) Maldives in its ambitious Ithihaan

(or Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development Project)” project. Ihavandhippolhu atoll is Maldives’ northern-most island. In the hopes of taking advantage of its proximity to what a Maldivian government website describes as the “channels through which the main East-West shipping route, connecting South-East Asia and China to the Mid-East and Europe” run, the atoll is being developed as a major Indian Ocean transport hub, with an airport, port, docks and warehousing facilities. To entice investors, the mega-project is being developed under Special Economic Zone (SEZ) provisions that give them tax breaks and exemptions from financial, environmental and labor laws.

Modi’s offer to partner in the Ihaven project is a clear challenge to China, which has been developing close ties with Maldives, including negotiating its formal inclusion in Beijing’s Maritime Silk Road.

In September 2014 Chinese President Xi visited the Maldives and a year later the two countries agreed to launch free trade negotiations. The Chinese government, banks and engineering firms are also financing and building a series of major infrastructure and development projects, including a US\$ 200 million bridge connecting Male and Hulhumale, the modernization of the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport, and a road between the interlinked islands of Gun and Funadhoo in Laamu atoll.

Beijing is also developing closer military ties with Male. Maldives’ Minister of Defense and National Security, Mohamed Nizam, visited Beijing in November 2014 and met with his Chinese counterpart. Recently, China started providing training to Maldivian maritime security personnel.

The Maldives’ ruling elite is clearly anxious to profit from the bounty of Chinese investments, but it is also desperate not to run afoul of New Delhi and Washington. Hence Yameen’s bowing and scraping during his visit to New Delhi earlier this month.

Yameen may be hoping he can still balance between Beijing, on the one hand, and New Delhi and Washington, on the other. But the ever-widening geo-political fissures are rendering such a policy increasingly untenable.

The US “Pivot to Asia” has pulled all of South Asia and the Indian Ocean into the maelstrom of great power conflict and war preparations, underscoring the urgency of building a socialist anti-war movement uniting the workers and toilers across South Asia in opposition to imperialism and all the rival national bourgeois cliques.

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