



INDO-PACIFIC February 2019

The Maldives: the joust between US, India and China

The 8th of February 2018 Maldivian envoys held talks with Chinese officials in Beijing, emphasizing their “*comprehensive cooperative partnership*”. A year later, on 7 February 2019, the US ambassador to the Maldives, Alaina Teplitz, tweeted that “*I love visiting Maldives to work with people who’ve set their country on a path to increased prosperity and freedom in the Indo-Pacific*”. In an era of Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) control and of energy security flows, the Maldives archipelago’s geopolitical position in the north-western Indian Ocean is of growing interest to outside powers.

The Indo-Pacific “path” being taken by the Maldives referred to the presidential election in September 2018 which saw a standoff between India and China over possible intervention, amid the narrow victory of opposition candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih over the incumbent Abdulla Yameen. Under Yameen, the Maldives had taken a pronounced tilt towards China, had enthusiastically embraced China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative, with constant unconfirmed reports of discussions over a possible submarine base for China at Marao atoll, and a sense that the Maldives had become one of China’s “string of pearls” across the Indo-Pacific. Instead, Solih announced an “India-First Policy”, and moved towards reconsidering various costly Chinese infrastructure projects.

India’s leader Narendra Modi was quick to lend support to the new Solih administration, attending the inauguration ceremony on 17 November. A visit by the Maldives Foreign Minister to Delhi was held on 26 November, followed by President Solih’s official visit for further talks with Modi on the 26-28th of December. Defence cooperation including joint patrols was announced, as was an announcement of \$1,4 billion from India to help the Maldives get out of its debt trap that had piled up with China’s various infrastructure and construction projects.

The Maldives has also moved closer to the United States. The US ambassador Alaina Teplitz and the Assistant Secretary of Defence for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, Randall Schriver conducted talks

with Maldivian defence and foreign affairs officials on 8 January 2019. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulla Shahid then headed a Maldivian delegation for high level talks with senior US officials in Washington. On 23 January, Shahid tweeted “*had a very good meeting with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale*” and went on to state that “*I told him that the US Indo-Pacific Strategy is a source of good for the Maldives and for the stability of the Indian Ocean*”. A month later and Shahid’s talks with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington on 20 February reiterated democracy norms and “*their shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region*”.

Developments then in the Maldives since September 2018 represent a step forward in US and Indian Indo-Pacific strategy, and correspondingly a setback to China.

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