

Maldives: US Indo-Pacific Strategy at One Year

By Dr. Rasheeda M. Didi

One year after the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States entered the geopolitically trendy arena with a vision of “[an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure.](#)” This entry, no doubt, confirms the belief of many countries in the recently recognized dynamic nature of the region.

Dr. Rasheeda M. Didi, Senior Fellow at South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN), explains that “Because of the attention given to China between 2013 and 2018, the Maldives has become a geostrategic battleground... Its strategic significance increased for the members of the Quad alliance... as they committed themselves to making the Indo-Pacific region stable, free, and open.”

The Maldives, one of the pearls of the Indian Ocean, has become a geopolitically important country since China’s relationship with it strengthened between 2013 and 2018. During this time, the government, which was led by President Yameen Abdul Gayyoom, signed many agreements with China, such as a Free Trade Agreement and multiple memoranda of understandings (MOUs). In addition, China was also entrusted with the most important infrastructure projects, such as the Sino-Maldives Friendship Bridge, an upgrade for the international airport, and the Hulhumale housing project. Moreover, in an unprecedented move, the Maldivian government even amended the land law, enabling the leasing of islands for 99 years.

Because of the attention given to China between 2013 and 2018, the Maldives has become a geostrategic battleground for China, India, and the United States. Its strategic significance increased for the members of the Quad alliance, the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, as they committed themselves to making the Indo-Pacific region stable, free, and open.

The Fluctuating Relationship

The Maldives-US relationship fluctuated over the years depending on the Maldivian government’s policies and behavior. In 2018, the United States threatened sanctions against the Maldives when its foreign policy alienated international bodies such as the Commonwealth, the EU, and even individual allies like Qatar and India, its most helpful and powerful neighbor. Specifically, Washington issued a [statement](#) that it would “consider appropriate measures against those individuals who undermine democracy, the rule of law, and a free and fair electoral process.” During this time, bilateral relations sank to a toxic level, as the United States was accused of colluding with the Maldives opposition by Public Service Media (PSM), a state-sponsored news outlet. The US government dismissed the accusation as being “fake news.”

However, gradually, the Maldives-US relationship improved significantly. Perhaps, the change was due to renewed Maldivian ties to US ally, India. Warming relations led to the signing of the “[Framework for US Department of Defense-Maldives Ministry of Defence and Security Relations](#)” in September 2022. This was a landmark achievement in the relationship, which set forth both countries’ intent to deepen engagement and cooperation in maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean.

The pact was enhanced by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s prior September 2020 visit to the Maldives to announce the establishment of a US Embassy, upending the practice of having a joint Embassy for the Maldives and Sri Lanka in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This proposal for a physical presence in the Maldives was, apparently, to keep an eye on peace and security in the Indian Ocean.

This was an ingenious move by the United States as its position in Diego Garcia is unsure and shaky, given the legal battle between the United Kingdom and Mauritius. Perhaps, it is time to seek another location for the US naval facility, and where is more attractive than the Maldives, as the nation’s strategic significance lies in its “[proximity to international sea lanes through which two-thirds of the world’s oil and half its container shipments pass through.](#)”

Maldives' Reaction

The Maldives would welcome the increased resources that Washington's Indo-Pacific vision brings to the region, such as assistance from the United States Agency for International Development, whose programs, for the past 20 years, had concentrated on supporting self-reliance, strengthening stability, and promoting economic growth in the Maldives. More specifically, the programs emphasize protecting the environment, strengthening democratic governance, and bolstering public financial management. These aims are highly beneficial for development in the Maldives.

But the question is, do the Maldives believe the US presence will focus on assisting the Maldives with perceived challenges of democratic governance, economic resilience in the face of climate change, combating extremism and terrorism, curbing corruption, and addressing a range of societal inequities? Conversely, should the Maldives conclude that US interests stem from a fear of China's increasing relationship with South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the Maldives, the recoil could serve to invigorate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/One Belt, One Road (OBOR).

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Maritime Security and Counterterrorism

The United States is satisfied with the Maldives for its advances in the domains of maritime security and counterterrorism, on which the two states work closely. For example, since 2012, the US and the Maldives have conducted 40 bilateral exercises in these areas.

President Solih's July 2019 [announcement of plans to facilitate the return and prosecution of Maldivian foreign terrorist fighters \(FTFs\)](#) was particularly important for the United States. Later, in October 2019, the country strengthened the existing anti-terrorism legislation with an amendment requiring the establishment of a rehabilitation and reintegration center for returning FTFs. The Maldives also has extended strong support to the American efforts to combat terrorism and terrorist financing.

In maritime security, the increasing defense relationship was manifested, in September 2022, by the visit of the US Coast Guard Cutter Midgett (MWSL 757). This was after an 11-year absence by the US Coast Guard, whose last visit was in 2009 when Coast Guard Cutter Boutwell visited the Maldives.

Conclusion

One year after the US declared its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Maldives-US relationship gained momentum leading to the landmark defense pact, the US-Maldives Defense Framework.

The United States works closely with the Maldives in the security domains of counterterrorism and maritime security. Within the counterterrorism arena, the United States fears increasing religious extremism in the Maldives, which involves the recruitment of Maldivians for Jihadist wars and other activities. In the realm of maritime security, Maldives will benefit immensely from US involvement as many foreign fishing vessels operate in the Maldivian waters.

The Maldives is strategically important to the United States due to its proximity to major international sea lines and the need for special diplomatic monitoring, given the nation's track record of treating China with special favor. Although now the country's strongest ally is India, the country could lean towards China again if the administration changes and the Progressive People's Party (PPM) wins the presidential election in September 2023.

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