



Island hopping

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Island hopping-After repairing ties with the Maldives, New Delhi should strengthen its Indian Ocean outreach

- In India a month after assuming his new responsibility, Mr. Solih has assured New Delhi that the Maldives is pivoting to the 'India First' policy.
- The five-year-long tenure of his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, was marked by a serious deterioration in ties with India, as Mr. Yameen steadily took his nation towards authoritarianism and into a close embrace with China.

Different vision

- Mr. Solih's government has adopted a different vision — one anchored in decentralised and people-centric governance.
- The joint statement issued during Mr. Solih's visit reflects a fine balance between the interests of both countries.
- To help the Maldives address its budget deficit and development challenges, India has worked out a generous \$1.4 billion assistance package.
- The visit resulted in the conclusion of four agreements relating to cooperation for information technology, culture, agri-business, and visa arrangements.
- The new government in Male has also given assurances to be fully sensitive to India's security and strategic concerns, in the light of reports that China has gained access to one or more islands for military purposes.
- On the valid ground that the security interests of both countries are "interlinked", India and the Maldives have agreed to be mindful of "each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region".
- The two governments now plan "to enhance maritime security" in the Indian Ocean Region.
- The trade and investment facet of the bilateral relationship is of a

modest nature, given the country's small population.

Indian Ocean stakes

- The deliberations in Delhi took place as China's footprint in South Asia has increased in recent years.
- There is a growing realisation that, owing to Beijing's strategic objectives, economic capability and assertive diplomacy, it is not feasible for India to supplant China in neighbouring countries.
- But India has its own advantages, assets and friends.
- The intention is to leverage them fully, deriving benefit from the neighbours' essential thirst for maintaining balance in their external relations.
- A new grouping of India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and the Seychelles, focussed on maritime security and economic development, looks attainable in the short term.
- In devising a smart action plan to implement the SAGAR, or Security and Growth for All in the Region, strategy, that was announced by Mr. Modi in March 2015, New Delhi should accord equal importance to its two key goals: address its neighbours' concerns on security challenges; and harness enticing opportunities for the Blue Economy.

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