



Restoring the balance

Posted at: 19/12/2018

Restoring the balance-India must remain invested in strengthening democratic institutions in the Maldives

- Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's three-day visit to India this week seems to have brought a tumultuous phase in India-Maldives ties to a close.
- This is Mr. Solih's first overseas visit after becoming the President of the Indian Ocean nation of 400,000 people.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi had attended the swearing-in ceremony of Mr. Solih as the President of Maldives in November, his first visit to the nation as Prime Minister and the first by an Indian head of state since 2011.

Points of engagement

- Mr. Solih's India visit has seen the two sides emphasise their traditionally close bond.
- Mr. Solih called India the island nation's "closest friend" and "reaffirmed his government's 'India-First' Policy", committing to working together closely with India.
- India, for its part, announced a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion for the Maldives in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit.
- Both have agreed to ensure that they would keep other's security interests in mind as they consolidate cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- They have agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the IOR through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance.
- In an attempt to boost trade ties, Mr. Modi "welcomed the expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives".
- Areas such fisheries development, tourism, transportation, connectivity, health, education, information technology, new and renewable energy and communications were earmarked for enhancing bilateral

cooperation.

The China factor

- Under Mr. Yameen, the Maldives had veered too close to China for India's comfort, welcoming Chinese money for major infrastructure projects and signing a controversial free trade agreement (FTA).
- India's entreaties for political moderation and closer security ties were summarily ignored.
- China's role in the Maldivian economy is under the scanner today amid growing concerns about the money the Maldives owes to China for infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese construction companies.
- The Modi government is also trying to ensure help reaches Male in time so that New Delhi regains some of its lost space in the Maldives' foreign policy and politics.

The domestic dynamic

- Going forward, the Maldives would need the support of India as its challenges remain acute.
- India should not be deterred by temporary setbacks.
- Instead of perpetually viewing the dynamics from a China-centric perspective, it must keep its eyes firmly on the long term.
- The more invested New Delhi is in strengthening democratic institutions in its neighbourhood, the better returns it will get in its foreign policy.

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