



India and Maldives: Exploring Newer Vista for Cooperation

*Vijay Sakhuja**

An eight-member Indian delegation led by Defence Minister A. K. Antony is scheduled to visit Maldives from August 20 to 22, 2009. Reports suggest that among other issues of mutual interest between the two sides, maritime security is likely to be high on the agenda. During the visit India would gift Maldives an Indian Coast Guard (ICG) helicopter and another helicopter of the Indian Navy would be transferred shortly.

India is expected to help Maldives set up maritime surveillance and reconnaissance systems including radars on all its islands and these could be networked with India's newly created Coastal Command to facilitate a seamless radar picture of common sea areas in the Arabian Sea. Further, the ICG would undertake regular air patrols in Southern Arabian Sea to help Maldives manage security of its waters. The delegation will also brief the Maldives Coast Guard on the Indian security architecture in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands under the operational control of the tri-services Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC).

There are several distinct challenges to Maldives security. Being a maritime nation, the first challenge appears in the form of the vulnerability of its large Exclusive Economic Zone. If left unattended, it has the potential to witness disorder in the form of piracy, terrorism, contraband trade, drug smuggling, or human smuggling carried out by both local and foreign actors.

The second challenge relates to the security of sea lanes. A large number of

vessels including supertankers, bulk cargo, chemical tankers container vessels and other types of shipping pass very close to the Maldives which places greater responsibilities on Maldives to ensure safety and security of shipping. Also, there is a likelihood of this shipping engage in illegal activities including dumping of waste that would have immense adversarial impacts on the marine environment with dire consequences on its tourism industry, a major revenue earner for the Maldives.

The third challenge emerges due to illegal fishing and poaching by foreign trawlers in Maldives waters that are rich in diversified marine life and resources. These have the potential to generate tensions with local fishermen engaging in piracy or even taking up arms and act as police to protect their legitimate interests.

The need to maintain round-the-clock surveillance and reconnaissance of the Exclusive Economic Zones is perhaps the biggest challenge before Maldives and has the potential to undermine national security. This vulnerability was amply demonstrated during 1988 when mercenaries attempted to overthrow the government of the then President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Significantly, the perpetrator had used the sea route similar to the terrorists that attacked Mumbai in 2008. By all estimates, the current security architecture of Maldives is not robust enough to deter, detect and defeat a challenger partly due to lack of capabilities.

At another level, Maldives must integrate the adversarial impacts of Climate Change and the resultant sea level rise that can cause inundation of large number of Maldives island territory. This would necessitate movement of people to safer destinations and even oversea. The current capabilities in the form of sea lift are inadequate.

During his visit to New Delhi, the Maldivian Foreign Minister had observed that -India-Maldives relationship forms the cornerstone of a successful foreign policy for the Maldivesø The new democratic government in Male looks up to India to help build vibrant democratic institutions and an independent judiciary through capacity building. The Minister further observed that piracy off Somalia and the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 were a wake-up call for Maldives and his government hoped to develop a robust security cooperation mechanism with India particularly to secure its maritime domain through cooperative surveillance, reconnaissance and capacity building. With Indiaø assistance, Maldives would be able to responds to a variety of maritime threats at sea and ensure security of the sea

lanes.

The new Maldives political leadership has endorsed its 'India First' policy. It looks up to New Delhi as a trusted neighbour that helped it in the past to protect its sovereignty and also assisted during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Maldives has emphatically denied that there are Chinese naval facilities on any of its island territories and assured that it has no plans in the future. Instead it seeks an exclusive security arrangement with India and does not wish to approach regional and extra regional powers for such agreements.

The current Indian initiatives are sure to strengthen the existing bilateral relations especially maritime cooperation with the Maldives. The Indian government gifted a patrol vessel INS Tillanchang to Maldives in 2006 and the Indian Coast Guard regularly conducts Exercise 'Dosti' that involves maritime patrolling and rescue operations around Maldives. The Indian Army conducts 'Ekuevring' a joint counter-terrorism exercise with the Maldivian National Defence Forces. Besides, several officers of the armed forces of the Maldives are trained in Indian military training institutions.

While the Indian initiatives to help Maldives improve its maritime domain awareness, the two sides could further expand their bilateral relations. Additional initiatives would enhance regional maritime security and both sides can accrue significant benefits in the following fields:

(a) Automatic Identification System: The Automatic Identification System (AIS) is a device fitted onboard a ship for monitoring its position, course and speed. International regulations make it mandatory for all vessels above 300 grt engaged in international voyage to be equipped with the AIS. In the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks, India has made it mandatory for all vessels including those below 300 tones dwt (dead weight tonnage) to have AIS, registration of all fishing vessels, and biometric identification cards for the crew. This initiative would help better accounting of the fishing boats out at sea both for reconnaissance and surveillance purposes as also during cyclones. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is developing a 'low-cost model' of AIS for the Indian fishermen to serve as security devices and these can be offered to Maldives.

(b) Digital Maps of Littorals: Digital maps offer a very high level of accuracy and can provide valuable information for a variety of operations at sea. India has

plans to develop digital maps of the country by using its own satellites under an ISRO project called 'Bhuvan'. The system is based on a network of satellites that would provide high-resolution pictures ten times more precise and at a much lesser cost when compared with Google earth. It will be useful to integrate the AIS , 'Bhuvan', Oceansat-2 and the command centers of India and Maldives to respond to maritime incidents in Southern Arabian Sea.

(c) Operational Interoperability: At the operational level, the need to reduce uncertainty is critical and this can be achieved through interoperability, effective doctrines and innovative force structure to enhance readiness for combined operations. Interoperability would result in enhanced understanding, foster mutual trust and co-ordination between India and Maldives.

(d) Regional Approach to Maritime Security: This brings us to the issue of a possible multilateral approach to maintaining maritime order in the Southern Arabian Sea. At functional/operational level, the Indian Navy has engaged both the Maldives and Sri Lankan navies through bilateral naval exercises, regular ship visits, training, transfer of naval hardware, and sharing of intelligence. In this context, it will be useful to explore a possible India-Maldives-Sri Lanka (IMSL) multilateral naval cooperation. It will be pertinent to remember that in today's context, maritime multilateralism is a tool for nations, who consider using sea power for cooperation in their national interests. This is applicable to both medium and small navies and is evident in their tactical and strategic interactions.

** Vijay Sakhuja, PhD, is Director (Research), Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
19 August, 2009*