India-Maldives Bilateral Relations

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Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih arrived in New Delhi on December 16, 2018, on a three-day state visit. This visit proved to be extremely beneficial for both the countries as it improved their bilateral ties which were very poor in the past.

After defeating, Abdulla Yameen, Solih took it in his stride to improve relations with India. Previously, the ex-president was more interested in Maldives relationship with China and aimed at bringing both of them closer. Anyone who tried to oppose it was jailed or exiled, this way removing any sort of opposition form his way. However, with Solih’s victory things are changing as he has given hope for stronger democratic institutions and better bilateral relations.

Solih also met Indian Prime Minister Ram Nath Kovind, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu. This meeting led to Narendra Modi visited the country to be part of president Solih’s swearing in ceremony. Back in 2015, a similar visit for Modi was scheduled but that had to be cancelled due to the declining bilateral relations between the two countries during Yemeen’s tenure.

As a part of the visit, the newly-elected president spoke about its country’s very old close ties with India and emphasized on his “India’s First Policy.” He also said that India is one of its closest friend and also emphasized that it is also its largest trading partner. In return, Narendra Modi declared that the government will be giving $ 1.4 billion using a credit line and to provide budgetary support. Another important point of discussion of this visit was related to the maritime domain. They spoke about increasing the cooperation in the Indian ocean by using aerial surveillance and patrols.
Solih’s positive attitude towards India is simply important for India’s foreign policy. In the past, Yameen favored China and support the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Not only this, they also further isolate close links with India by letting various Chinese companies take up big infrastructural projects and also signed the free trade agreement (FTA). Official in Delhi viewed this step, on part of Beijing to be a way to reduce India’s influence in the Indian Ocean region.

During the visit both, “reiterated their assurance of being mindful of each other’s concerns... and not allowing their respective territories to be used for any activity inimical to the other.” It is quite evident that the clear reference as the other territory is China and its activities in the past. The country has not really stopped and has continued to build ports, bridge across the Indian Ocean.

Not only this, both the sides signed various agreement. They also released a Joint Statement where they clarified that they will be working together on issues such a visa arrangement, ecosystems, cultural relations and also in the field of information and communications technology (ICT). This statement was released by the Ministry of External Affairs. Furthermore, both the parties also discussed how areas such as medical, legal collaboration, tourism and human resource. In fact, India is also very keenly interested in assisting and helping the Maldives with its infrastructural development. The Indian private sector is planning to invest there.

The problem simply arises because China has influence over the Maldives via the “debt-trap diplomacy”. One report suggests, that Maldives has loans of over more than $1.5 billion from China. Now, the reason why Solih wants to maintain closer relations with India, so that it can provide it financial support and they can hopefully get rid of at least some of the debt. It is beneficial for India too, because this way, it gets back its lost position to china. India is hoping that after these constructive steps, the Maldives government will put halt on a few of China’s infrastructural projects.

Although, what India is expecting Maldives to do seems a little novice, given that the country is currently revisiting the FTA with China. However, India should still continue
to hope as shutting doors towards China would put it both traditionally and geographically in a more leading position.

Throughout the time during Abdulla Yameen’s tenure India tried to not use any military force against him. They held all the meeting and timely coordinated with the responsible stakeholders, doing everything in a diplomatic manner. They had even put pressure to hold the election in an absolutely fair manner. All these efforts and patience, today gives in an advantageous position.

One important task in front of president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih restore credibility of all the forces that were damaged previously. This could be very difficult given the disparity of the existing forces. Additionally, Islamic radicalization is another ongoing factor in the country. However, he president should continue to make efforts in order to curb the increasing corruption. In order to meet these challenges, Maldives, will require India’s support.