



Image: IE

This was the first visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the Maldives since the beginning of his tenure. Last time visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the small island country located in Indian ocean region was in the year 2011 by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Prime Minister Modi attended the swearing-in of Ibrahim Mohammad Solih as the President of Maldives.

The Maldives was going through a bad time. Former President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency in response to a Supreme Court order quashing the conviction of former President Mohamed Nasheed who was facing a charge of terrorism. India's status as peacekeeper of the region and primary regional partner of the Maldives was challenged, as Yameen, who was perceived as "pro-China" in India, decided to use the Maldives' strategic location on the Indian Ocean to play one power against the other.

Maldives closeness to China increased as big Infrastructure Project was given to Chinese company and Chinese Naval ships were also allowed to dock in the City Capital Male. Relations with India also deteriorated. The Maldives also signed its first ever free trade agreement (FTA) with China. Though recently after the visit of Indian PM, Maldives decided to take it back. But during Yameen's time, Maldives also agreed to become the partner in China's Maritime Silk Route. The Maldives was backed by China and asked India not interfere in its internal matters.

The Maldives also asked India to take back one of the two naval Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) Dhruv, which India gifted it. The Maldives cancelled a contract for major Indian investment in an airport due to a change of leadership. It also cancelled work permits of many Indians indicating a further deterioration of ties.

India established its formal diplomatic relations with the Maldives after its independence in the year 1966. Every time when the Maldives was in need of help, India has always given a supportive hand whether it's the operation Cactus in 1988 under which India provided its military aid of 1600 soldiers to the fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or its support with bottled water in the Maldives when only water treatment plant collapse in the Year 2014. Many projects such as Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH), Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET) and others were also established by the help of India.

Relations between India and the Maldives have had many highs and downs. India helped the Maldives set up its coastal surveillance capabilities. India is a major economic partner for the Maldives.

Prime Minister Modi's visit can be seen as a counter to China's influence in the region. Gesture shown by the newly elected President is quite commendable.

Defence Minister of Maldives Mariya Ahmed Didi, said that they were very "excited" to see Prime Minister Modi attend the event and that the Maldives will always follow an 'India First' policy. Both the leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region. The Maldives also said that there is no plan of returning the gifted Dhruv Helicopters.

The Maldives has a strategic location in Indian ocean and India being a major power in the Indian Ocean has the highest stake in the stability of the region. China too can be countered from time to time by limiting its influence in the Indian Ocean. And it can be done when the nations present in the Indian Ocean will maintain a healthy relationship with India.

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