



## **Maldives: Why the US and India Should Remain Calm**

by Nilanthy Samaranyake

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The recent coup in the Maldives has caused consternation in the United States and India, arousing fears that the Maldives is falling into the hands of Islamic extremists, that the country's political instability could somehow increase China's influence in the strategic sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, and that India now faces a new security threat to its southern flank. A careful consideration of these factors shows that these fears are unfounded. The tourist hamlet of the Maldives is unlikely to be a source of regional instability anytime soon.

On Feb. 7, Mohamed Nasheed, who became president through the Maldives' first multi-party elections in October 2008, was forced to resign against his will – allegedly at gunpoint. Nasheed's former vice president, Mohamed Waheed Hassan, assumed the presidency and has appointed an aide to Nasheed's autocratic predecessor, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Both the US and India have recognized the new government, albeit with the requisite admonitions to avoid a descent into violence and pursue the reconciliation of differences.

The coup is not good news for South Asia. All countries in the region had been governed by democratically elected leaders since 2008. India also does not want any of the Maldives' sprawling 1,200 islands to serve as sites for Muslim extremists to launch seaborne terrorist attacks. In fact, some Maldivians were arrested in Pakistan in 2010 for terrorist activity and training at camps in South Waziristan. Indian Minister of Defense A.K. Antony recently discussed how the November 2008 Mumbai attacks jolted his country into recognition of such maritime security threats.

There are many reasons why the Maldives is not about to be lost to Islamic extremists or China. First, its economic growth depends on tourism, with estimates that tourism and related services constitute between one-third and two-thirds of the Maldivian GDP. The new Maldivian leader would do great damage if the country becomes known as a hotbed of Islamic extremism in the Indian Ocean instead of a haven for wealthy tourists. In fact, the government requested US and Indian assistance when Somali piracy became a problem for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) to contend with. Terrorist groups will undoubtedly try to recruit in the Maldives, but the country's leadership understands the implications of terrorism for its economy and welcomes counterterrorism assistance from the US.

Second, China does not possess the capabilities to add the Maldives to its supposed "string of pearls" in the region. While China has become the only non-South Asian country to set up an embassy in the Maldives and sends the largest number of tourists to the islands, it cannot compete with India's civilizational ties and security offerings. The Maldives has even sought to purchase land in India for the relocation of its citizens in case they become environmental refugees as a result of climate change and rising sea levels. The MNDF also benefits from a significant amount of military assistance from India, including counterpiracy help, maritime surveillance, training, and surveys. A review of annual reports from the Indian Ministry of Defence reveals that the Maldives has more interactions with the Indian Navy and Coast Guard than any other country in the Indian Ocean. Conversations with MNDF officers last year confirm their need for India's help with capacity-building efforts, as the MNDF does not possess the ability to patrol all its dispersed islands. No matter which leader is in power – Waheed, Nasheed, or even Gayoom – the Maldives does not want to forgo India's security assistance.

Third, even if the Maldives takes on a more Islamic color politically, that would not be the end of the world to India or the US. President Gayoom, perceived as more fervently Muslim in worldview, had strong relations with both countries during his 30-year rule. Following the coup, New Delhi quickly acknowledged the legitimacy of the new leadership, despite its seizure of power. India's relationship with Myanmar since the early 1990s under its "Look East" policy is evidence of the government's willingness to engage with undemocratic regimes in a tradeoff for strategic benefits.

If India does become concerned about violent Muslim extremism emanating from the south, it can intervene militarily as it did in 1988 when Gayoom requested assistance in quelling an external threat by the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam. India's Navy has modernized considerably since the 1980s and possesses greater capabilities than when it deployed in 1988 — or for that matter in 2004 to deliver relief to Maldivian survivors of the Indian Ocean tsunami. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asserted in a November 2011 speech to the Maldivian Parliament that "this is our extended neighborhood. We wish to work with the Maldives and other like-minded countries to ensure peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean region."

The coup in the Maldives brings uncertainty to the country's internal political development and stability. Observers' fears about increased Chinese sway in the Maldives and about Islamic extremist threats to India do not seem likely to materialize anytime soon, however. The world should allow this young democracy to experience the travails associated with the process of democratization, unencumbered by the strategic baggage imposed by outside observers.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*

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