

Maldives and India in 2015: Spoilt and Restored

By N Sathiya Moorthy

In cricket-like analogy, India-Maldives relationship in 2015 was the story of a rain-spoilt first half leading to a tame-draw. It is not about the drawn game, but about the fact that some game was after all possible.

Yet, India-Maldives bilateral engagements in the second half of 2015 was as cautious as players on the field not wanting to slip-up on the rain-drenched field and hurting themselves. But unlike in field games, bilateral diplomacy in this case entailed more frequent and equally vigorous engagements.

Twist in Relations

There is no denying the cold vibes had crept into bilateral ties after the 'long-delayed' arrest, fast-tracked trial and quick-fix imprisonment of former President Mohammed Nasheed in native Maldives. Nasheed's arrest in the 'Judge Abdulla abduction case' dating back to his days in power was not entirely unexpected, nor was the timing. The conversion of what essentially was/is a criminal case to a 'terrorism case' under a relatively unenforced law, however, came as a shock.

Even before the Nasheed arrest, the sacking and later arrest of then Defence Minister, Col Mohamed Nazim (retd.), on charges of plotting to eliminate President Abdulla Yameen, had become a cause for concern, for India as for much of the rest of the international community. In both cases, the greater Indian concerns were about their impact on continued political stability in the immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood.

India's concerns continued to grow in quantum and quality with what possibly is a global record for two vice-presidential impeachments in three months. Both were personal choices of President Yameen in their time. The first of the two, Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, was Yameen's running-mate in the 2013 presidential polls, and was in self-exile for weeks when impeachment came through. The other, Ahmed Adheeb, was in prison, on the charge of plotting to kill President Yameen.

In this background, it is inconceivable that the Maldivian leadership, political, diplomatic and administrative, should confuse the solitary Indian concern over the suspected police manhandling of a detained Nasheed on the Male court premises for anything more than that. It is another matter that India did not take forward the previously discussed Maldives leg of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's four-nation Indian Ocean neighbourhood visit of March, following the tension attending on Nasheed's arrest and a series of domestic political developments preceding the same.

Fresh Impetus

As President Yameen had acknowledged later in the year, under PM Modi, India's neighbourhood policy received a new impetus. It might not have become the fulcrum of the nation's foreign policy, and acknowledged as such, but all along, India's long-term and long-distance foreign policy has also been influenced and impacted by neighbourhood issues and concerns. It pertains to China and/or Pakistan at one level, and to other land borders and the Indian Ocean sea-front, on the other.

To PM Modi should also go the credit of flagging off a new policy-approach towards the neighbourhood by inviting their government leaders to his May-end 2014 swearing-in. Maldives should know that as a people's person, the Prime Minister will be eager to meet with the Indian immigrants in this country too.

Personalities and personal preferences apart, the Indian security agencies have been highly sensitive to clearing any prime ministerial visit to Maldives in the midst of political uncertainties and consequent apprehensions of a law and order situation, which could become unmanageable. The otherwise narrow roads of capital Male would not have been able to handle a suddenly erupting street-situation, at which Nasheed's MDP cadres have been masters.

This apart, Maldives has officially-acknowledged Islamic State recruits from the country dying for their cause in distant Syria. No Indian would want his prime minister or president to be exposed to any risky situation overseas, leave alone nearer home. The former would have also had the unintended politico-diplomatic fallout on the bilateral front. At a time when the new leaderships in the two nations were working towards normalisation of relations after the 'GMR row' and attendant fall-out, Maldives could not have overlooked the avoidable strains in India-Nepal relations in the light of the Kathmandu hijack episode at the turn of the millennium.

Record Exchanges

For all the palpable cold vibes between the two nations in the first half of 2015, the second half had a more-than-usual quota of bilateral exchanges, both in each other's capitals and elsewhere, too. Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj (India) and Dunya Maumoon (Maldives), and their respective Foreign Secretaries, S Jaishankar and Ali Naseer Mohamed, seemed to have created more opportunities than otherwise might have been available to them to meet up with each other, and update each other, both on domestic and regional developments.

India has been particularly concerned about the increasing Chinese influence on Maldives and the purported possibilities of Beijing exploiting the same for anti-India politico-strategic initiatives, particularly in the shared Indian Ocean. Maldives, particularly under the Yameen leadership, was seemingly worried about the possibility of India mixing bilateral relations with domestic politics in

their country, pertaining to Nasheed's arrest and the continual western demand for his 'immediate release', all in the name of 'restoration of democracy' in the Indian Ocean archipelago-nation.

The mutual exchange-visits over the past months, and meetings at venues as the sidelines of the UN Security Council, have helped erase much of the mutual suspicions. The level and quality of the exchanges were enhanced by an exchange of letters between President Yameen and Prime Minister Modi.

With the result, bilateral relations at the end of the year 2015 might have been closer to where it was at the commencement of the year. In December 2014, India made near-history by air-dashing large quantities of drinking water to capital Male, when an accident had hit the city's only desalination plant. To ordinary Maldivians, and their politico-administrative class alike, it was a near-repeat of the larger northern neighbour despatching military assistance with equal speed and thwarted a mercenary-involved coup bid against then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (half-brother of incumbent Yameen) in 1988.

'India First'

Yet, the taste of the pudding is in the eating. A clear success of the ongoing exchange-visits and missions would be visible when, and only when, the two nations are able to ensure that mistrust does not creep in, whoever is in power in either nation. They need to add lasting substance to what continues to remain as gestures and reassurances.

President Yameen has revived the bilateral ties reiterating Maldives' commitment to his 'India First' approach; possibly the only domestic and foreign policy issues over which there could be a national consensus. India has continued to reassure all neighbours, this time through the Maldivian experience, that it would not interfere in their internal affairs, be it in the larger cause of democracy or individual freedom, as perceived by its friends in the West and those in Maldives, too.

Both at the UNHRC and in the recent Commonwealth Summit at Malta, India clearly distanced itself from all efforts by the UK and other European members and their friends elsewhere, to flag the 'Nasheed arrest' issue. As Maldives was possibly given to understand, it was not as if India did not have concerns on those fronts. Instead, India respected the systems in these countries, and would work with them, to achieve the results that are desirable and achievable.

As is often argued, the international community and more so post-Cold War, has been expecting India to do or say things on its neighbourhood that they would not be doing unless there is an acknowledged or emerging adversity at work. This confused global perspective may have already cost India neighbourhood trust more often than otherwise.

Yet in the more contemporary context, critics of India do point to what they say is Indian interference in neighbourhood nations like Nepal, and choosing friends in Bangladesh. They also refer to former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa's post-poll public pronouncement that Indian agencies had worked with the West in having him defeated in January 2014.

Adding Substance

As India is despatching a new High Commissioner in Akhilesh Mishra to Male, in the place of incumbent Rajeev Shahare, who has been posted to Denmark as Ambassador, the question that all Maldivians would want an answer from India is this: Will PM Modi keep his date with their nation in the New Year?

From an official Maldivian perspective, an acceptable conclusion to the 'Nasheed case' is possibly a factor, but bilateral relations should go beyond it. Yet, the Yameen leadership too should consider the Indian predicament in such matters just as it wants India to appreciate its domestic situations and compulsions, not all of them legal and judicial.

Alongside, the two sides should also ask themselves, how to add more 'substance' to the bilateral relations than already. Though a political gesture for most parts, would a hot-line between the two leaders help them sort out mutual apprehensions of every kind head-on, without letting them pile up and grow avoidable diplomatic moss underneath.

Going beyond the duty, supply, education and health-sector concessions that India has been offering Maldives and Maldivians for long, the controversy-ridden GMR deal and consequent delays attending on Tata Housing have denied bilateral relations what was genuinely and justifiably due to them. While Tata Housing has since been retrieved, the GMR row alone remains in memory on both sides of the Ocean.

The two Governments now may have to rework their priorities and time-lines, to take forward possible plans for larger Indian development projects in and for Maldives – be it in the public or private sector. India should also consider the strategic gains that it might have had if pushed for locating the tri-lateral maritime command, also involving the common Sri Lankan neighbour, in Maldives, when the other two were keen on the same.

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