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## India - Maldives Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism: Why and How

27 Sep, 2012

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In a recently concluded three-day visit of the Indian Defence Minister, A. K. Antony to Malé, India and Maldives have agreed to work together to ensure "the stability in the region is maintained; and above all... threats, particularly from terrorist groups and other non-state actors, are kept under control." "terrorist groups and other non-state actors" were they talking about? Are the threats grave enough to merit structured bilateral cooperation between the two countries?

Maldives, although a 100 percent Sunni nation, was considered to be not much affected by the rise of Islamic radicalism. However, in recent years, Maldivians in increasing numbers have been drawn towards the Pakistan-based madrasas and jihadist groups. The *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) charitable front organisation in the atoll – *Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq* – has established a foothold in the southern parts of Maldives. This is in the guise of providing relief operations after the 2004 tsunami. At any given point in time, there are over 50 Maldivian nationals at these madrasas which are controlled by various jihadist groups. There are several enrolled in Saudi Arabian madrasas as well, who, on their return, spread only the virus of radical ideas, but they also have increased opportunities to become part of jihadist networks. These madrasa-educated individuals are encouraged to fight the jihad in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya. They also help in the direct recruitment of Maldivian citizens. It is worth noting that the terrorist, Ali Jaleel, who was involved in the 27 May 2009 suicide attack on the ISI headquarters in Lahore, was a Maldivian.

It is not surprising therefore that the events in West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan have influenced the youth towards the process of radicalisation emanated from inadequate educational and employment opportunities. The current rate of unemployment in Maldives stands at over 14 percent. The manifestation of radicalisation in the form of first-ever terror attack in September 2007 at Sultan Park of its capital Malé, left 12 injured and 3 dead, among the generally peace-loving Maldivians. Investigations of the attack indicated that the *Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen*, a new Maldives-based terrorist group, links with the LeT was the mastermind. This incident worried the government as the economy heavily depends on tourism and terrorism is a threat to the earnings from this sector and cripple the economy. What is more worrying for India is the infiltration of Indian terror group Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) to Maldives, especially after its crackdown in India.

The Maldivian government under Mohammed Nasheed resorted to some stern measures to tone down the radicalisation through regular prayers and seminars. All mosques were required to register with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and those which were unregistered were declared illegal and even dismantled. The raid on Dhar-ul-Khair mosque in Himandhoo Island in October 2007 was a case in point. The government also imposed a strict regime to help prevent foreign Islamic clerics from teaching in the local madrasas. But, these measures did not go down well with the public. One of the principal reasons for Nasheed's eventual ouster was his anti-radicalisation stance.

The crucial question then is why is Maldives considered suitable by terror groups like the LeT? There are several reasons for this; Maldives is a small Sunni Muslim country with a population of about 380,000. It is made up of 1192 small islands (grouped into 26 natural atolls), most of which are spread across over 860 kilometers in a north-south axis; anonymity, therefore, is not an issue. The island-state is also not too far from the Indian coast making it an ideal launch pad for attacks through sea. Pakistan-based terror groups know very well that launching the next attack on India from Pakistan would be difficult due to tightened security on the land and maritime boundaries. The LeT has plans to use the deserted Maldivian islands as storehouses for weapons and explosives and move them to India when required. These islands are also ideal for establishing training facilities for the maritime front. The Maldivians' superior knowledge of the sea is an asset to any terror group planning to carry out maritime terrorist activities.

It is in this context counter-terrorism cooperation between India and Maldives gains significance. The existence of any terror bases or breeding grounds for terrorism in the Indian neighbourhood threatens Indian security. India cannot remain a mute spectator. Though, India and Maldives have been conducting joint counter-terrorism exercises on regular basis, it is not enough. There is an urgent need for structured counter-terrorism cooperation between the two maritime neighbours. The structure could include counter-terrorism training and capacity building, handing over of fugitives, sharing of intelligence, investigative assistance, joint-patrolling and maritime security. On its part, the Maldives, which is now under a new government, should take counter-terrorism more seriously. India can consider helping Maldives by creating more educational and vocational institutions so as to provide an alternative to Maldivian students over the madrasa option. India can also attract a sizeable number of the Maldivian students to its educational institutions through the liberal dispensation of scholarships. Apart from investing in Maldives, New Delhi can also encourage its businessmen and industrialists to set up ventures in the islands. The setting up of anti-terror measures and sharing of information with the Maldives are critical to India's maritime security.

Published Date: 27<sup>th</sup> September 2012

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