



Maldives Security Outlook

Quarterly Review Series

July-September 2025 (Volume 3) &
October-December 2025 (Volume 4)

MNDF Coast Guard ship Huravee during a routine patrol



Photo by Aishath Shaha, Marketing Department, MNU

Maldives Security Outlook: Quarterly Review Series

About *Maldives Security Outlook: Quarterly Review Series*

The Maldives Security Outlook – Quarterly Review Series (MSO-QRS) represents a landmark initiative of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies of The Maldives National University (MNU). As the first dedicated journal series in security studies published by MNU, it establishes a formal platform for scholarly research, policy analysis, and critical debate on national, regional, and global security issues. The series is designed to provide academics, practitioners, and policymakers with evidence-based insights into emerging security challenges, ranging from maritime security and climate-related risks to geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean region. The articles featured in MSO-QRS are drawn from Maldives Security Outlook (MSO), which was originally launched and published online in May 2025 on the MNU website. MSO-QRS curates and makes minor edits to MSO. The references are formatted to reflect important sources used by authors. The printed and PDF versions of the MSO-QRS form a structured quarterly to promote and produce security discourse in Maldives, for policy, undergraduate and postgraduate use.

About the Editors

The Maldives Security Outlook – Quarterly Review Series (MSO-QRS) is edited by Dr Athaulla A. Rasheed, Head of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS) at MNU, who provides strategic leadership and anchors the series in national and international security discourse. In addition, Dr Rasheed is the founding editor of the original articles on MSO, also with co-editors Dr. Lailufar Yasmin, Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, contributes her deep knowledge of South Asian and global security affairs, and maritime security, enriching the comparative perspectives of the publication, and Dr. Ahmed Zaki, Assistant Professor of Journalism at MNU and a writer of war history, whose interdisciplinary insights connect media, historical narratives, and security studies.

Message by MNU Vice Chancellor Dr Aishath Shehenaz Adam

As the nation's first academic review journal on security studies, the *Maldives Security Outlook – Quarterly Review Series* (MSO-QRS) represents a pivotal advancement for The Maldives National University (MNU). Developed by the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies of MNU, MSO-QRS provides a platform for scholarly inquiry and policy analysis on critical aspects of national, regional, and global security. This printed edition curates and disseminates original scholarship, and I thank the editorial team for guiding the research produced by MSO authors. The journal will be a valuable resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying security and strategic affairs at MNU and beyond.

Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS)

The Maldives National University
Rahdhebai Hingun, Malé 20371
The Republic of Maldives
<https://mnu.edu.mv/csss/>

Contents

Exercise Dosti: Enhancing Maritime Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Small States	1
Geopolitics of Ports: Foreign Policy and Maritime Security in Sri Lanka.....	3
Enhancing Water Security in India through Water Sharing Treaties and Arrangements	6
Requirement for Inter-agency Collaboration in Maldives' Maritime Law Enforcement.....	8
Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour Beyond the Pacific and Southeast Asia – the Strategic Maritime Links with Maldives	10
Maldives–India Defence Cooperation Dialogue: Building Strategic Narratives in the Indian Ocean	13
Maritime Pollution Risks and Preparedness in Maldives – Thinking Local and Regional Security Strategy	15
Navigating Geopolitical Currents: Small States' Maritime Strategy and Domain Awareness in the Indo- Pacific.....	18
China's Global Security Initiative Through the Maldives' Lens	20
Assessing the Dual Threat: Safety and Security Implications of Floating Armouries for Maldivian Waters	23
Maldives–China Strategic Ties, a Continuing Engagement	25
Shaping Energy Security Discourse in Maldives: Culture, Environment and Geopolitics.....	27
Framing Small States' Food Security and Fisheries Protection – A Regional Strategy for Maldives.....	29
Defence Cooperation Forges Stronger Regional Alliances – Small States' Strategy	33
Maldives – A Rising Transit Hub in Maritime Drug Trafficking, Navigating Security	36
Australia–Bangladesh–Maldives Interoperability at Sea: A Strategic Web of Relationships	38
Tailoring Maritime Security in Maldives: Beyond Dependency	40
Maritime Synergy in the Indo-Pacific: Australia's Strategic Patrol Boat Gift to Maldives	43
Tracing Climate-Induced IUU Fishing Patterns: A Maritime Security Strategy for Small States	46
Maritime Security Dilemmas: The Indian Ocean Islands and the Quest for Regional Stability.....	48
War, History and Small States' Security: Navigating the Maldives' Role in the Second World War	50
Engaging Security and Academic Discourse: Research Development at MNU.....	52
Connecting the Dots: Navigating Big Data Analytics for Maritime Security through Academic Platforms in the Maldives	54
Academic Platform for National Security: Streamlining Multidisciplinary Faculty at The Maldives National University	56
Editor's Remarks: Chat with the Chancellor of The Maldives National University.....	58

Exercise Dosti: Enhancing Maritime Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Small States

By Lt Col Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 21 December 2025

Introduction

The Indian Ocean is one of the most strategically important maritime zones in the world. It serves as a conduit for global trade and energy supplies, linking the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and East Asia. With its busy sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), the region faces persistent challenges ranging from piracy and illegal fishing to environmental hazards and humanitarian crises. Against this backdrop, Exercise Dosti (the trilateral maritime exercises between India, Maldives and Sri Lanka) has emerged as a vital instrument of maritime diplomacy in Maldives.

Exercise Dosti was launched in 1991 as a bilateral exercise between India and Maldives, expanded in 2012 to include Sri Lanka, and remains one of the oldest continuous maritime Coast Guard exercises in the Indian Ocean region.¹ Dosti symbolises friendship and cooperation between the Indian Ocean coastal nations. It is conducted biennially. The exercise brings together the Coast Guards of these nations to practice joint drills like Search and Rescue (SAR) and pollution response.

Mauritius, Seychelles and Bangladesh participated as observers during Dosti 15 (2021), signalling the potential for broader regional participation. More than a technical drill, Dosti is a diplomatic initiative that strengthens trust,² enhances interoperability, and builds collective capacity to address shared maritime security challenges, portraying a significant element of maritime diplomacy in the Indian Ocean.

Island Identity and Maritime Diplomacy

The island identity of Maldives places it at the centre of the maritime security domain. As a large ocean state, the ocean becomes the biggest resource and area of challenges for island states. Comprising 1190 islands and an exclusive economic zone of

almost one million square kilometres, over 98% of the area that must be safeguarded is ocean. The protection demands dealing with internal and external issues. Furthermore, the resource constraints demand aid cooperation.

Maldives has navigated its development and security interests with regional partners, including through defence cooperation agreements, and a great deal of its cooperation in the defence area involves partnering with India, the United States and Australia to establish and strengthen protection mechanisms at sea.³ Maldives face several challenges at sea. This includes piracy, maritime drug trafficking, IUU fishing and all of the main threats they pose, which arise from foreign sea and land, stretching the country's security forces' resources to deal with them alone.⁴

Military-to-military engagements extend beyond regional partnerships, and dealing with extra-regional actors requires Maldives to navigate its national priorities with traditional regional frameworks, especially the rules-based engagements promoted by the Indo-Pacific partners, including India and Sri Lanka.

Enhancing Regional Maritime Security

According to the Information Fusion Centre IFC Singapore and IFC IOR 2024 annual report, the Indian Ocean is vulnerable to piracy, trafficking, and illegal fishing.⁵ Exercise Dosti directly addresses these threats by improving the interoperability of the participating Coast Guards. Joint SAR operations ensure rapid response to maritime accidents, while pollution control drills enhance environmental protection.

For example, in May 2021, when MV X-Press Pearl caught fire while it was anchored off the coast of Colombo, the Indian Coast Guard jointly worked with the Sri Lankan Navy to extinguish the fire – Maldives' authorities also kept a close eye out through diplomatic and operational channels with their regional counterparts.⁶

In addition, to deal with marine pollution in the Indian Ocean region, there is a Regional Oil and Chemical Spill Contingency Plan for the South Asian Seas.⁷ It is coordinated by the South Asian Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) and

was created with support from the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). This plan gives countries a way to work together during major pollution emergencies. By 2018, all member countries – Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – had approved it through an MoU.⁸

Exercise Dosti can help these countries to put agreements like this into action by driving countries to work together. For example, equipment such as oil-containment booms is different in each country, and these drills let teams check whether their tools are compatible and see what technical problems exist. What they learn can help guide future purchases, so countries use equipment that matches or works well together, making it easier to combine their resources during a regional oil-spill emergency.

Building Trust and Confidence

“Trust” among states is a critical foundation for regional stability, but it is frequently strained by historical tensions, border disputes, and shifting geopolitical alignments. In South Asia, scholars have opined, states such as India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives have each experienced periods of mistrust—i.e. Indian–Sri Lankan political frictions during the civil war era, and concerns in Maldives about external influence.

For example, in Maldives during the 2023 election campaign, India-Maldives relations faced a notable change with a politically drawn India (military) out campaign, driving public sentiments to include the election outcome against the then incumbent, who had closer political ties with India’s authorities. It took a continued show of determination from both sides, via exchange of high-level visits, to clear potential diplomatic clout and further enhance the long-standing diplomacy between the two nations.⁹

Against this backdrop, Exercise Dosti serves as an important confidence and trust -and trust-building measure by facilitating predictable and structured interaction among the Coast Guards of the participating states and their respective agencies. For example, a key factor behind this could have been Exercise Dosti-16, held in February 2024. Maldivian defence minister Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon inaugurated the exercise by highlighting

the importance of collaboration and interoperability among the Coast Guards of the three nations.¹⁰

Another way to build confidence is through institutions that can connect states’ interests. For example, the proposition to include Bangladesh, Mauritius and Seychelles as observers marks the multilateral aspects of the Dosti-15 platform.

A multilateral Dosti initiative could support the Indian Ocean maritime security community, in conjunction with other regional initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The exercise enhances inclusivity and strengthens regional resilience against shared challenges. For example, by forming a regional strategic/collective partner, clean-up efforts for incidents such as the MV Wakashio oil spill could have been accelerated, minimising damage to the environment.

India’s leadership is yet crucial. India plays a central role in Exercise Dosti, leveraging the exercise as a tool of maritime diplomacy – i.e., India’s stake to guarantee regional security is higher than that of its smaller nations. India provides leadership and resources, reinforcing its position as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean.¹¹ This aligns with India’s broader strategic vision under the ‘Security and Growth for All in the Region’ (SAGAR) doctrine, and the recent ‘Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions’ (MAHASAGAR), which emphasises collective prosperity and security.¹²

Beyond operational benefits, Dosti carries both a political and operational significance. The name itself—meaning *friendship*—underscores the spirit of cooperation. The Exercise, thus, contributes to shaping regional norms of collaboration and solidarity, reinforcing the idea that maritime diplomacy is constitutive of a shared responsibility between regional actors. In that, small states have a mutually assured commitment to regional security objectives.

Conclusion

Exercise Dosti is a diverse instrument of maritime diplomacy in the Indian Ocean. It enhances security through combined operations, strengthens disaster response capabilities, builds trust among states,

and expands regional cooperation. Strategically, it reinforces India's leadership role while providing smaller states, such as Maldives, with security and diplomatic benefits. The exercises embody friendship and solidarity, contributing to the construction of a cooperative regional identity.

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), with 20+ years of experience in the maritime domain. He also has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that the statements, opinions and arguments made are his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policies and position.

1. MNDF. (2021). Trilateral exercise Dosti commenced; Sri Lanka Coast Guard. (2025). News.
2. Embassy of Maldives in India. (2025). Maldives-India relations.
3. Rasheed, A. A. (2025). Australia's Indo-Pacific endeavour beyond the Pacific and Southeast Asia – the strategic maritime links with Maldives.
4. Jameel, A. (2025). Maldives – a rising transit hub in maritime drug trafficking, navigating security
5. Information Fusion Centre. (2024). Annual report 2024; Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region. (2025). Annual report 2025.
6. High Commission of India in Colombo. (2021). MV X-Press Pearl: Relief operations by India; The President's Office. (2021). President sends message to Sri Lankan President expressing solidarity following disaster aboard MV X-Press Pearl.
7. International Maritime Organization. (2016). South Asian countries meet to finalize regional oil and chemical spill contingency plan.
8. South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme. (2020). Update on the activities of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) – South Asian Seas Programme (SASP) – for the 2020 report of the SG on oceans and the law of the sea.
9. Ali, S. M. (2021). Sri Lanka's strongman legacy: Instability. *New Lines Institute*; Rasheed, A. A. (2024). Balancing internal and external obligations in the Maldives' foreign policy. *East Asia Forum*.

10. Maldives National Defence Force. (2024). Minister Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon inaugurates trilateral joint exercise 'DOSTI-16'.
11. Bhattacharya, S. (2024). India is Embracing a 'Net Security Provider' Role in the Indian Ocean Region. *The Diplomat*.
12. IMPRI. (2025). Security and Growth for All Regions (SAGAR) 2015; Durai, S. (2024). India's maritime vision: From SAGAR to Indo-Pacific to Mahasagar. *Indian Embassy Dili*.

Geopolitics of Ports: Foreign Policy and Maritime Security in Sri Lanka

By Dr Bhagya Senaratne

Analysis

Published in MSO, 07 December 2025

Introduction

Ports are an integral part of Sri Lanka's economy and identity. Historically, ports were instrumental in placing Sri Lanka on the world map. While port development shapes strategic debate and geopolitics, many of its drivers are rooted in the very heart of domestic politics, community and culture.

Sri Lanka has seven major commercial ports and 24 fisheries ports. Sri Lanka's land mass is 65,610 square kilometres, which is insignificant when compared to its Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) zone, which is 27 times larger than the island's land mass.¹ Extending its maritime identity, in 2009, Sri Lanka made submissions to the 'Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) to extend the outer limit of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles to claim an oceanic area almost equal to 25 times its total land area with potential hydrocarbon reserves.'² Sri Lanka's locational importance is further amplified by its convenient access to international trade routes immediately south of the island (12 nautical miles).

This discussion shows the link between domestic identity and the geopolitical implications of Sri Lanka's ports, indicative of small states' agency in regional policy.

Small state identity and connectivity

Generally, small states are unable to wield significant influence in regional and global policies.

However, some small states can shape narratives in policy and security communities like those in the Indian Ocean or the Indo-Pacific regions.

Sri Lanka's story illustrates that it has managed to exceed expectations in shaping important regional and global discussions.

Sri Lanka's identity, shaped by its international connectivity through history, gives it the persona of being larger than it is. This larger-than-life identity features prominently when it interacts with the world. To such an extent that Sri Lanka has been instrumental in convening the Colombo Powers meeting in 1954, playing a pivotal role in the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as in maritime security and discussions related to terrorism through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).³ Notwithstanding, Sri Lanka has demonstrated that small states have a rightful place in the region and can shape conversations.

In the security sphere, Sri Lanka has, for example, 'chaired the IORA Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS) for a period of two years, ending 2021'⁴ and played a crucial role in 'introducing the SAARC Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism.'⁵ Sri Lanka also actively participates in naval exercises like 'Dosti'⁶ (trilateral maritime exercises between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives) and SLINEX⁷, 'Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training' (CARAT), RIMPAC (the Rim of the Pacific Exercise), AMAN⁸, to name a few. These exemplify the role small states can play in regional and international politics and security, should they choose to do so.

Ports and local drivers

As an integral part of Sri Lanka's economy, ports drive exports, imports and even the transshipment of goods and services. It is also a favourite with foreign naval vessels for port calls. Since ports are Sri Lanka's gateway to the world, they have been driven by both internal and external needs.

The Port of Colombo⁹, for example, is ranked among the top 25 ports in the world and the best in South Asia. This port drives Sri Lanka's trade with the

external world and, in turn, the local economy.

Given its accessibility to international shipping lines and history, it also contributes significantly to the Indian economy by being the main transshipment hub for Indian shipments. Therefore, locally, the Port of Colombo is known as the gateway to the world and the driver of the economy. Its development, expansion and reputation are, therefore, of significant importance and interest to local politics.

The Hambantota International Port¹⁰, on the other hand, was constructed due to a political need to develop the southern regions of Sri Lanka. It outshone an economic need or an organic need for a port through local industries and investments. Even though this port is reputed for its strategic positioning along the sea lanes, and often cited for its Chinese management¹¹, it is less significant in local economics. The Hambantota Port is at times discussed locally when there is a need to discuss irresponsible debt, fiscal management and the sale of Sri Lankan land to foreign entities.

The development and expansion of the Port of Kankesanthurai¹² (KKS) in the north of the island have been driven by local and geopolitical interests. India offered a US \$ 62 million grant¹³ to develop the port, so that it can increase its people-to-people connectivity with Sri Lanka, as well as maintain political connectivity with the island at a time when they feel the southern port of Sri Lanka permits Chinese engagements in the island and the Indian Ocean region. Ensuring that they take the lead in the KKS port development reduces the risk of another foreign government's engagements closer to India's borders.

According to the *Proposal for Sri Lanka Navy's Strategy 2023 and Beyond*¹⁴, 'the development of key infrastructure projects, including the Hambantota Port, Colombo City, the expansion of the Port of Colombo and the proposed Trincomalee development plan has drawn significant international attention.' This illustrates that Sri Lanka's ports are highly internationalised, with geopolitics playing a considerable role when compared with local needs.

Sri Lanka's maritime security leadership

While port development is essential for accessing the oceans and for stewardship in maritime security, Sri Lanka's aspirations have been less inclined to significantly develop ports around the island. Most of Sri Lanka's port development initiatives have been driven by geopolitical interests rather than catering to local needs. Often, as stated above, Sri Lanka has received international interest in developing and operating its ports, which are strategically located. KKS, Trincomalee Port and Colombo Port are a few examples of this interest. China, India and Japan have shown the most interest in developing these ports.

Even though Sri Lanka Navy has provided significant support in developing Sri Lankan ports, its primary focus has been on protecting territorial waters and safeguarding maritime assets through regular patrols and surveillance, particularly in strategic locations like the Indian Ocean region. Sri Lanka Navy demonstrates its keenness and ability to govern international waters through various roles it plays in mitigating piracy, apprehending narcotics in the open seas and conducting naval exercises.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka continues to play an active role in the Indian Ocean region and in international and regional politics, exceeding the expectations of a small state. Port development in Sri Lanka is driven more by a need to connect with the world than a need arising from local demands. It is also driven by the support received from the international community, which enables physical presence in the Indian Ocean region. Port development in Sri Lanka has received increased attention from regional and international powers, illustrating that port development is not merely a local requirement or an act driven by local development plans.

Author

Dr. Bhagya Senaratne is the inaugural Director of Education at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies, Sri Lanka. She previously served as the first BRI Postdoctoral Fellow at NYU Shanghai's Center for Global Asia and as a Senior Lecturer at Sri Lanka's Defence University. At NYU Shanghai, she led the 'BRI and South Asia' project,

the 'CGA BRI Talk Series,' and managed communications for the Mapping Global China initiative. Her research focuses on foreign policy, Chinese defence and foreign policy toward South Asia, Indo-Pacific studies, and maritime security. Her work appears in leading journals and edited volumes, including The Routledge Handbook of US Policy in the Indo-Pacific. She has authored and co-edited Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations (2017), Sri Lanka's Post-Independence Defence Policy (2023), and From Friendship to Dependency (2025).

1. Sri Lanka Navy. (2024). Proposal for Sri Lanka Navy's Strategy 2030 and Beyond.
2. Senaratne, B., & Nicklin, G. (2022). Maritime connections between New Zealand and Sri Lanka: Connected by empire, separated by distance. *National Security Journal*.
3. Senaratne, B., & Nicklin, G. (2022). Maritime connections between New Zealand and Sri Lanka: Connected by empire, separated by distance. *National Security Journal*; Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute. (2023). Sri Lanka assumes the Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) at the 23rd Council of Ministers in Colombo.
4. Ibid.
5. Nicklin, G., & Senaratne, B. (2024). Geopolitical realities faced by small states: A comparison of New Zealand and Sri Lanka's relationships with their closest neighbors. *Small States & Territories*.
6. Ministry of Defence – Sri Lanka. (2024, February 21). SLNS Samudura leaves for Maldives to take part in Exercise Dosti – XVI.
7. Sri Lanka Navy. (2025). SLINEX-25 sets sail in Colombo.
8. U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka. (2024). United States and Sri Lankan navies to conduct upcoming CARAT Sri Lanka 2024 exercise in Trincomalee.
9. Hiru News. (2025). Colombo port's nine-month container volume grows despite omission warnings.
10. Hambantota International Port Group. (2025). What do we do?
11. Hambantota International Port Group. (2025). Leadership.
12. Sri Lanka Ports Authority. (2025). Kankesanthurai.
13. Daily Mirror. (2025). Govt still uncertain on KKS Port development under US \$62 million Indian grant.
14. Sri Lanka Navy. (2025). Strategy 2030.

Enhancing Water Security in India through Water Sharing Treaties and Arrangements

By Anuttama Banerji

Analysis

Published in MSO, 20 November 2025

Introduction

It was recently reported that India had decided not to participate in the scheduled “Neutral Expert Proceedings” on the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) to be held in Vienna, Austria.¹ The Indian government took this decision since the IWT ‘had been held in abeyance’ after the dastardly terrorist attacks on innocent Indian tourists in April 2025 in Pahalgam.² This news came close on the heels of the report stating that the Indian government had communicated to the Bangladeshi side that it wanted to ‘renegotiate’ the Ganga Water Treaty (GWT) that was up for renewal in 2026. India also simultaneously informed the Bangladeshi side that it required more water to meet its development needs.³

India’s resource geopolitics takes a realist position. Its water security strategy is no exception. Treaties on the equitable distribution and sharing of water have been the bedrock of India’s regional cooperation with its neighbours. Today, there has been a notable shift in India’s water policy position, prioritising national interests in geopolitics.

Moreover, India’s foreign policy stance on water has been oriented towards protecting Indian interests. This has not prevented its close, lower riparian, (water-dependent and sharing) neighbours, including Bangladesh, from viewing India’s position as antithetical to their interests.

The State and Water in South Asia

Water-based policy can shape and reshape relationships in South Asian societies. For example, ‘control over water’ is pragmatic, and water can act as a socio-political source for power projection. Water was once managed by local communities, including through customary practices.

However, due to increasing environmental challenges and scarcity, its allocation and protection are now overseen by the state – i.e., national policies prioritise supporting water-allocation arrangements within and between societies.

In this respect, the capacity to access water resources can drive India’s realist state in regional politics. On the one hand, for India, water is an essential resource for its growth and development, and its control has been tangibly associated with ideas of national security and international relations. On the other hand, Bangladesh’s accession to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992 Water Convention) in June 2025 would not change India’s national priorities.⁴ Water is a state-level, not federal-level matter. Hence, engaging with international conventions requires attention not only at the federal level policy but also to state-level concerns.

Considering that India’s nationally focused water strategy, which asserts a level of controlled management of water access to neighbours, has a wounding effect, and hence, its reading and assessment must also be done with a thorough understanding of the implications of water at the national development, security and foreign policy level.

India and Access to Water in Context

India’s population is 1.4 billion, which translates to about 18 per cent of the world’s population. Water is one of its most sought-after resources. However, India houses only 4 per cent of the world’s water resources, making it a water-stressed country – i.e., natural and man-made impacts of water, such as seasonal droughts and floods, rapid urbanisation and continued depletion of groundwater resources, pose a potential existential crisis for India’s socio-economic sustainability.⁵

Access to water has been a prerequisite and an integral part of effective state building – i.e., India’s national planning is assertive on water security.⁶ National policy must reflect domestic needs and vice versa. Domestic needs can inadvertently prompt India to break away from and reconsider the

long-standing tradition of insulating water-sharing cooperation from broader political and military objectives. The Indus Water Treaty is a classic example. And fears are rife among stakeholders that India may follow a similar pattern with the Ganga Water Treaty with Bangladesh in 2026.

India's Current Position Explained

Traditionally, India has viewed water treaties as a strategic tool for security cooperation. However, India does not have end-to-end access to major water resources. For example, in the Indus River system, India has access to the east-flowing rivers, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej.⁷ Water resources from the western rivers, despite flowing through Indian territory, are mostly controlled by Pakistan, India's western neighbour, an effect driving India to incorporate its national water policy into key aspects of its foreign policy strategy.

In this respect, India's decision to review its bilateral treaty-based engagement(s) with its lower riparian neighbours, including Pakistan and Bangladesh, can be viewed in terms of India's effort to become water-resilient, while navigating its national interests in coordinating regional resource-distribution, allocation and management.

For example, there has been a push to divert water flows within India – i.e., to reiterate Prime Minister Narendra Modi: 'Now, India's water will flow for India's benefit, it will be conserved for India's benefit, and it will be used for India's progress'.⁸

With this policy stance, India's decision on the Indus River system has also raised concerns within Bangladesh.⁹ For example, some level of stress may lie concerning India's potential decision to adopt a similar approach to the sharing of the Ganga. For example, India's lack of foreign policy attention to negotiate the Teesta River treaty with Bangladesh has only created persistent fears among Bangladeshis.¹⁰

One thing to consider is that, while India has prioritised protecting national water resources, its potential failure to navigate regional arrangements, including bilateral interests, can engender long-term security implications for South Asian relationships.

Conclusion – Moving Forward

India must strategise its communication and public engagement, including policy and political campaigns, across its neighbourhood to ease the fears of neighbouring countries and settle potential water-related disputes or engagements related to existing and newly negotiated agreements. While water may not be the source of conflict in South Asia, it has the potential to become an effective threat multiplier, furthering the emergence of protracted social conflicts.

Vis-à-vis Pakistan, India must consider strategies to renegotiate the Indus Water Treaty by bringing, within the contours of the existing treaty, newer concerns such as groundwater depletion and climate change, hitherto non-existing concerns, during the signing of the treaty. The inclusion of these modern concerns will be a signal to stakeholders that India does not wish to abrogate water-sharing agreements with neighbours, and these steps at abeyance are time-bound interjections to ensure modifications are duly made and incorporated within the text of the treaty.

For example, in Bangladesh's case, signing the Teesta water treaty will be a considerable confidence-building measure between the two countries. This can also enable India to build a strong domestic constituency within Bangladesh and may enable bipartisan support for ties with India in the long run. In addition, India should renegotiate the Ganga water treaty as well to rebuild trust with its eastern neighbour.

Author

Anuttama Banerji is a Research Associate at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, India. She graduated with a Master's degree in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 2018. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of her own and do not reflect the Indian Government's policies and positions.

-
1. Kumaraswami, S. (2025). India to skip Indus Waters Treaty proceedings in Vienna. *Deccan*

- Chronicle*; United Nations. (1960). Indus Waters Treaty.
2. Ministry of External Affairs. (2025). Transcript of special briefing by MEA April 23, 2025
 3. The New Indian Express. (2025). Union govt presses Bangladesh on review of Ganga Treaty.
 4. Indian Express. (2016). Blood and water cannot flow together: PM Modi at Indus Water Treaty meeting; Jolly, S. (2025). Water as a multilateral issue? The case of Bangladesh and implications for Indian diplomacy. *South Asian Voices*.
 5. World Bank. (2023). How is India addressing its water needs?; Vishwanath, A. (2019). India's water-stressed future is now; Mahadevan, A. V. (2024). A parched nation: Analyzing India's water scarcity challenges. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 59.
 6. Indian Government. (2025). Union Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Jal Shakti Minister Shri Chandrakant Raghunath Patil launch National Initiative on Water Security.
 7. Ministry of External Affairs. (n.d.). Indus Waters Treaty.
 8. The International Risk Podcast. (2024). Rivers in peril: The collapse of the Indus Water Treaty and the future of South Asia's water security.
 9. Bhattacharjee, K. (2025). India's decision on Indus casts shadow on renewal of Indo-Bangladesh Ganga water treaty: Top Bangladesh water expert. *The Hindu*.
 10. Banerji, A. (2021). India Must Settle the Teesta River Dispute With Bangladesh for Lasting Gains. *The Diplomat*.
 11. Vishwanath, A. (2022). *South Asia's water problem is a climate change issue*. *Inkstick Media*.

Requirement for Inter-agency Collaboration in Maldives' Maritime Law Enforcement

By Lt Col Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 20 November 2025

Introduction

Maldives faces multifaceted challenges in maritime security and governance, drawn from protecting national territory against piracy and drug trafficking to coordinating regional operations against Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in

Maldivian waters. The effectiveness of the country's maritime law enforcement is best measured against its capacity to establish and maintain strong inter-agency collaboration.

For example, Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends over 900,000 square kilometres – i.e., the ocean territory is over 98 percent larger than its land area. The ocean, needed for sustaining the economy through fisheries and tourism, yet exposes the nation to threats originating from within and outside its territory. National-level effort is required to address them.

The MNDF Coast Guard leads national efforts to secure the ocean. The Marine Police, under the Maldives Police Service (MPS), handles maritime crime investigations. The fisheries ministry oversees resource management.¹ The Maldives Customs Service enforces trade laws and prevents illegal imports. Then, the Maldives Immigration manages border control, legal travel, and immigration-related security. These agencies have formal engagements with each other in the maritime domain functions. However, despite the formal linkages between law enforcement bodies, their operations need further institutional connectivity to avoid siloed work and improve collaborative functions.

Resource Coordination and Inter-Agency Collaboration

With the large ocean to protect, a state's security and non-security agencies must pool resources to navigate and address threats to national properties and activities.

The MNDF has a Joint Interagency Operations Centre (JIOC) within its Integrated Headquarters (IHQ) that coordinates national-level operations. During such operations, assets and resources have been shared between the MNDF and other agencies.² This way, operational costs can be minimised.

In the Maldivian maritime context, agencies can function as autonomous actors with distinct mandates and limited resources. In this respect, the Coast Guard's mandate to lead maritime security operations can be an integral part of coordinating resources in operations at sea.³

National policies require the Coast Guard to coordinate its operations with other law enforcement agencies. For example, according to national policies on IUU fishing, the fisheries ministry should coordinate its operations with the Coast Guard in dealing with illegal fishers at sea – i.e., inter-agency collaboration has been initiated by national policies. This would be to minimise costs and create effective ways to address local challenges at sea.⁴

Cost-Effective Operations through Collaboration

Conducting operations at sea can be expensive. For example, on a good rough-weather day, the Coast Guard can be operating in multiple locations. The Coast Guard can dispatch its fleet for a variety of search and rescue operations – i.e., rough weather can capsize boats or cause breakdown, leading to drifting events that require Coast Guard's help.

With potential exhaustion of resources, the Coast Guard would also benefit from working jointly with local law enforcement agencies like the MPS missions at sea, and vice versa.

Moreover, joint operations have helped minimise the duplication of resources. Coordinated use of assets, such as Coast Guard vessels or MPS equipment, can support operational efficacy and increase the sustainability of resources.

In 2016, MPS and the Coast Guard worked together on an anti-drug operation.⁵ MPS received information that a group of Maldivians had left in a high-speed Gulf Craft to collect drugs from a foreign ship coming from Pakistan. With the limitation of a long-range vessel, MPS sought the Coast Guard's assistance – i.e., immediate data-sharing and resource exchange was initiated. The Coast Guard was able to do surveillance, pursue the suspected vessel and take control of the situation using its long-range ships. When it came near Malé, MPS officers boarded and secured the suspected boat, apprehending the perpetrators via a successful joint operation.

The author was the officer in charge of the Coast Guard vessel during this operation.

Functionally, MPS lacks larger and long-range vessels, with vessel-tracking radars, limiting their

monitoring and surveillance capabilities at sea; hence, working with the Coast Guard makes practical sense.

Overlapping Mandates and Collective Law Enforcement

Maldives' legal framework can also assign overlapping powers to various agencies. For example, both the MPS and the Coast Guard are responsible for enforcing maritime laws, which include inspecting vessels to ensure they meet the standards set by the transport authority.

In this setting, the 2019 Fisheries Act grants some of its enforcement responsibilities to multiple agencies.⁶ For example, the Fisheries Act's Section 9 Article 57 gives the power of enforcement to MPS, the Coast Guard and the Maldives Customs services to enforce fisheries law. Hence, functionally, without proper coordination, agencies can encounter challenges to work jointly and serve as the edifice of cooperative enforcement.

For example, the Fisheries Ministry can share information on local vessels from which the Coast Guard can pinpoint locations of suspected vessels – i.e., in case they report any foreign vessel fishing illegally in Maldives EEZ. On 23 September 2022, the Coast Guard detained a foreign fishing vessel operating within Maldivian waters. The incident was reported by a local fishing vessel. Using the vessel tracking system provided by the fisheries ministry, the Coast Guard was able to identify the vessel's location and carry out a swift interception.⁷

Inter-agency standard operating procedures (SOPs), combined training programs, and legal coordination committees can ensure that each agency's actions complement rather than duplicate others'. For example, there is an existing white shipping information agreement signed between the Indian Navy (Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region) and MNDF to enhance cooperation and collaboration.⁸ These SOPs can serve as a basis for creating standard operating procedures for coordination between national agencies.

At present, all law enforcement agencies in Maldives use their own software for Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). For example, the Coast Guard uses sea vision (United States) or IORIS

(European Union) software for monitoring and information sharing. If such datasets operate in isolation, situational awareness will be fragmented. Hence, integrating them through a National Maritime Domain Awareness Platform would provide a comprehensive, real-time view of all maritime activity within Maldivian waters.

A centralised MDA system would enhance surveillance efficiency, reduce duplication, and enable rapid decision-making during crises such as illegal fishing incidents, drug seizures, or search-and-rescue operations. In this regard, the MNDF Coast Guard is already planning to establish a National Maritime Information Fusion Centre (NMIFC), where representatives from all maritime law enforcement agencies can work together and collaborate on improving information sharing.

In essence, the government's overarching maritime objectives – ensuring national sovereignty, protecting marine resources, promoting the blue economy, and maintaining maritime security – require a unified approach.⁹

Conclusion

In certain respects, Maldives has a fragmented institutional structure for maritime law enforcement mechanisms. This can undermine its capacity for maritime security and governance. By enhancing inter-agency collaboration, grounded in institutional and functional connectivity between security and non-security agencies, Maldives can address challenges in conducting surveillance and monitoring effectively.

Establishing a unified command framework, such as a Joint/Combined Maritime Operations Centre or a National Maritime Information Fusion Centre (NMIFC), can optimise resource use, strengthen coordination, and enhance maritime domain awareness.

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), with 20+ years of experience in the maritime domain. He also has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that the statements, opinions and

arguments made are his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policies and position.

-
1. Ministry of Fisheries, Maldives. (2024). Minister Ahmed Shiyam met with H.E. Ahmed Mahloof, Ambassador of the Maldives to Japan.
 2. President's Office. (2021). President officially inaugurates Joint Interagency Operations Centre.
 3. Maldives National Defence Force. (2019). MNDF capstone doctrine.
 4. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2019). The Maldives national plan of action to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (NPOA-IUU).
 5. The Edition. (2024). Maldives seizes 29kg heroin haul in record drug bust.
 6. Maldivian Government. (2019). The Fisheries Act of Maldives.
 7. MNDF. (2022). Coast Guard has detained an illegally entered fishing boat.
 8. Kapoor, Ritika V. (2019). India's Maldivian rapprochement. *National Maritime Foundation*.
 9. President's Office. (2025). President affirms Maldives' sovereignty, pledges that every square inch of national territory will be safeguarded by Maldivians.
-

Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour Beyond the Pacific and Southeast Asia – the Strategic Maritime Links with Maldives

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 28 October 2025

MNDF & Australian Defence Force commence Indo Pacific Endeavour 2025 in Maldives, focused on human capital, knowledge sharing, faith-based engagements.

Introduction

Maldives has been visited by the Australian military under the Indo-Pacific Endeavour (IPE). This year marks the advancement of military-to-military engagement between the two countries, reflecting a

growing strategic alignment in the Indian Ocean region.

The idea of IPE is to promote joint operations in the Pacific and Southeast Asia – such as Exercise Alon in the Philippines and engagements in Vietnam and Bangladesh – which demonstrate Australia’s outward projection of defence and military strategy under the 2024 Defence Strategy. The 2025 IPE mission engaged in countries across Southeast Asia and the Northeast Indian Ocean, including Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.¹

The announcement of the Guardian-class Patrol Boat to Maldives in 2025 illustrates one of the many defence engagements stretching across the Indian Ocean small states. Australia’s IPE visits are reciprocal in nature, fostering intersubjectivity and local-level connectivity with Maldives. These engagements promote shared understanding and support a rules-based order for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Australia’s broader strategic vision of inclusive regional partnerships aligns with Maldives’ efforts in building interoperability in the maritime security operations.

Small States in the Traditions of IR

What would India, as the largest security actor of the Indian Ocean, view of Australia’s increasing engagements with Maldives on the strategic front?

Maldives appears to show a level of agency in navigating national interest—for example, in climate adaptation, sustainable development, and diplomacy – in global policy making. Regionally, by shifting foreign investment priorities between India and China, the country has demonstrated a level of reliance on domestic influence in foreign policy choices despite big power politics.² In IR, domestic narratives formed by a country’s interaction with threats or opportunities can drive foreign policy and security thinking. If climate adaptation is integral to security, then development – i.e., building reclaimed lands—for sustainability can mean more to shape foreign partnerships.

For example, Maldives’ major connections with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate this – i.e., the Maldives-China Friendship Bridge,

expanding the international airport, and reclaiming lands for residential housing require funds, and those funds can come from any partnership. China or India is not seen as a partner to merely meet a traditional security need. That is why how a relationship could undermine traditional security arrangements might not be obvious at first. When realised – due to pressure from traditional partners, e.g., India not being happy with Maldives-China ties – it can alter strategy for foreign partnerships. This can create opportunities for like-minded countries like Australia to enhance cooperation. As part of the QUAD – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – Australia will fit as India’s preferred partner to bolster military engagements with Maldives.³

Australia–Maldives Strategic Relations

Australia and Maldives established diplomatic relations in 1974. Traditionally, Australia has aided Maldives in development, including higher education training and climate adaptation initiatives – the 2022-23 budget estimate for Australian Official Development Assistance to Maldives is AUD\$2.8 million.⁴

Australians see the Maldives as a great surfing destination. Connecting with islands comes naturally for Australians – the High Commissioner in Maldives travels to local islands, building connections with local authorities and communities. Many Maldivians studying in Australia promote mutual people-to-people connectivity.

Defence and security were secondary earlier in cooperation – naturally, for the Maldives too. Now, in a time when a level of militarisation has been apparent, with geostrategic competition between great powers drawing Maldives into their security arena, strategic decisions are more critical. Strategically, it would make sense for Maldives to choose partners for military relations. However, it is even better if the country could build a level of interoperability with regional security actors so that it can maintain a level of control over activities and lead joint operations in its territory – the Guardian-class Patrol Boat can strengthen the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard capabilities to navigate regional missions.

Traditionally, via DOSTI, Maldives and Sri Lanka form interoperability with India in maritime security – for example, sharing of data and conducting joint exercises could inherit a level of control over local contexts. Strengthening the military aspects of security is a key aspect of the defence policy priority. For example, the launching of Turkish tactical drones and a Doğan-class fast attack craft is indicative of this shift.⁵

In these respects, Australia’s contribution comes as part of its Indo-Pacific efforts. The Guardian-class Patrol Boat will enhance its maritime surveillance and enforcement capabilities, supporting its ability to deter, detect, and disrupt illegal maritime activities across its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Indo-Pacific Endeavour Programme

IPE began in 2017 and has evolved into a flexible, tailored programme that strengthens partnerships through military cooperation, joint training, and cultural exchange.

In Maldives, IPE has included a wide range of activities:⁶

- **Search-and-rescue workshops** led by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority.
- **Faith-based engagements**, such as Royal Australian Navy Chaplain Imam Majidih Essa leading televised Friday prayers and mental health sessions with MNDF personnel.
- **Indigenous music collaborations**, with RAAF Flight Lieutenant James Evans performing alongside MNDF musicians using traditional instruments.
- **Sea Training Group exchanges**, where Australian trainers worked with the crew of CGS Shaheed Ali to enhance operational readiness.
- **Deployment of a P-8A Poseidon aircraft** for maritime surveillance demonstrations and static displays for MNDF and government officials.

Commander IPE Brigadier Jennifer Harris hosted a **gender, peace and security forum** in Malé, while Australian Defence Adviser Colonel Amanda Johnston led workshops on workforce modelling and military justice. These engagements reflect a holistic approach to defence diplomacy, integrating human capital development with strategic maritime cooperation.

Vice Admiral Justin Jones AO, CSC, RAN, Chief of Joint Operations, stated:⁷

“IPE25 is a clear demonstration of Australia’s commitment to openness, transparency, and respect for sovereignty; with activities that are safe, professional, and reflect current security and defence issues.

“Through IPE engagements, we are strengthening our people-to-people and inter-agency relationships within our region, achieving a common understanding of shared security challenges.”

Conclusion

IPE has expanded beyond its initial Pacific and Southeast Asian focus to include strategic engagements with Indian Ocean small states like Maldives. For Maldives, these engagements offer opportunities to enhance maritime security, diversify defence partnerships, and assert its agency in regional and global affairs. As the Indo-Pacific continues to emerge as a central arena of geopolitical contestation, the Australia–Maldives relationship stands as a model of inclusive, mutually beneficial security cooperation.

Author

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

-
1. Australian Government. (2024). Indo-Pacific Endeavour

2. Rasheed, A. (2024). Balancing internal and external obligations in the Maldives' foreign policy. *East Asia Forum*.
3. Smith, S. A. (2021). Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to know. *Council on Foreign Relations*.
4. Australian Government. (2025). Australia-Maldives Relationship.
5. Rasheed, A. (2024). Is Maldives ready for its tactical drones? *360info*; Naval News. (2025). Türkiye donates fast attack craft to Maldives, commissioned as CGS Dharumavantha. *Naval News*.
6. Australian Government. (2025). Busy building ties and trust throughout the region. *Defence News*; Australian Government. (2024). Didgeridoo diplomacy in Maldives. *Defence News*
7. Australian Government. (2025). Indo-Pacific Endeavour commences 2025. *Defence News*.

Maldives–India Defence Cooperation Dialogue: Building Strategic Narratives in the Indian Ocean

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 9 October 2025

Introduction

Defence strategic narratives are powerful instruments in shaping foreign policy, especially for small island states like Maldives. These narratives help articulate national security priorities, define regional alignments, and project sovereign agency in a complex geopolitical environment. For Maldives, the Indian Ocean is not just a geographic reality – it is a strategic lifeline. The country's security is deeply intertwined with the stability of the region, making defence cooperation with India a central pillar of its foreign policy and security.

The Maldives–India defence cooperation dialogue, held in Malé on 7 October 2025, reaffirms this strategic orientation.¹ Coinciding with the anniversary of Maldives' President Mohamed Muizzu's high-level talks with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2024, the 2025 dialogue reflects a continuity of purpose and a deepening of bilateral defence ties.² This analysis revisits these ongoing

defence and security engagements between the two countries.

Strategic Context and Symbolism

The October 2025 defence dialogue is symbolically significant. A year earlier, on the same date, Muizzu and Modi had agreed to elevate bilateral relations under India's Neighbourhood First policy and Vision SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region). These frameworks emphasise regional cooperation, maritime security, and developmental assistance – i.e., these principles align closely with Maldives' strategic interests in forming foreign partnerships.

India's role as a "First Responder" in times of crisis – whether during the 1988 coup attempt, the 2014 Malé water crisis, or the COVID-19 pandemic – has been repeatedly acknowledged by Maldivian leadership. This narrative of reliability and proximity reinforces India's position as a trusted partner in both emergency response and long-term strategic planning. This creates the intersubjectivity to drive mutual interests between the two countries.

Defence and Security Cooperation: A Multi-Dimensional Partnership

The October 2025 defence dialogue would produce a comprehensive set of arrangements that reflect the evolving nature of Maldives–India strategic cooperation – i.e., military cooperation, capacity building, defence equipment promotion and regional security engagements. These arrangements are not merely transactional – they are embedded in a shared vision for regional stability and mutual development.

Both countries face common threats in the Indian Ocean, including piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, drug trafficking, terrorism, and climate-induced maritime risks. For example, Ekuverin, Dosti, Ekatha and Operation Shield have strengthened the Maldives National Defence Force's (MNDF) capacity. Maldives, with its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – i.e., 98 per cent of its territory is ocean –, is particularly vulnerable to maritime threats. The defence dialogue is integral in acknowledging this vulnerability and reaffirms India's commitment to support Maldives in addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

To revisit the ongoing arrangements that would reflect the recent dialogue:³

- **Provisioning of Defence Platforms and Assets:** India will supply defence platforms to augment the operational capabilities of MNDF – i.e., India will work with Maldives to share expertise, augment capabilities and undertake joint cooperative measures, as per the needs and requirements of Maldives.
- **Surveillance and Monitoring Enhancements:** India will provide radar systems and other surveillance equipment to strengthen MNDF's maritime domain awareness.
- **Hydrographic Cooperation:** India will continue to support Maldives on the hydrographic survey work, through capacity building and training, as per the requirements of the Maldivian Government. In 2024, Maldivian Government decided not to extend the hydrographic survey agreement with India; however, it rechannelled cooperation in the technical field and exchanges. The 2024 and 2025 high-level visits reaffirmed to collaborate on mutual grounds.
- **Disaster Response and Risk Mitigation:** During the 2024 and 2025 visits, both governments agreed to develop SOPs and conduct joint exercises to improve interoperability – i.e., these will feed into the ongoing DOSTI trilateral exercises between navies and coast guards of Maldives, India and Sri Lanka.
- **Information Sharing Infrastructure:** India will support the development of secure information-sharing systems through infrastructure, training and sharing of best practices.
- **UTF [Uthuru Thila Falhu] Harbour Project:** The ongoing MNDF 'Ekatha' harbour project at UTF, supported by India, was highlighted as a key initiative. With somewhat controversial dialogue around the topic, the

UTF Harbour Project will portray the significant strategic orientation between the two countries.

- **Ministry of Defence Infrastructure:** A new Ministry of Defence building in Malé, constructed with Indian assistance, was inaugurated jointly by Muizzu and Modi in 2025.
- **Capacity Building and Training:** India will increase training slots for MNDF, Maldives Police Service (MPS), and other security agencies.
- **Financial Assistance for Defence Infrastructure:** India will extend financial support to develop and upgrade MNDF facilities.

Conclusion: Strategic Narratives in Transition

Muizzu's early tenure was initially marked by the "India Out" campaign, which called for the removal of Indian military personnel. However, the narrative has since evolved. The July 2025 visit of Modi to Malé marked a strategic reset. The October 2025 defence dialogue consolidates this shift, reflecting a pragmatic embrace of India as a strategic partner. The dialogue is a testament to the power of strategic narratives in shaping policy and partnerships. For Maldives, the narrative is one of agency, alignment, and aspiration. For India, the narrative reinforces its role as a net security provider and regional anchor. The convergence of these narratives will continue to define the trajectory of Maldives-India relations.

Author

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

-
1. SunOnline International. (2025). Maldives and India discuss closer defence ties.

2. President's Office. (2024). President Dr Muizzu and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold high-level talks.
3. Ministry of External Affairs. (2024). India and Maldives: A vision for comprehensive economic and maritime security partnership. *Bilateral Documents*.

Maritime Pollution Risks and Preparedness in Maldives – Thinking Local and Regional Security Strategy

By Lt Col Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 8 October 2025

Introduction

Maldives is particularly vulnerable to maritime pollution. The country's efforts to develop comprehensive preparedness strategies to address potential incidents at sea would be integral to the regional security strategy.

Geostrategically, Maldives occupies a significant position in the Indian Ocean – i.e, more than 40 per cent of global oil shipments moving from West Asia to East Asia transit through sea lanes traversing its territory. Maldives has functioned as a pivotal maritime transit hub, facilitating commercial connectivity at sea. From the 9th century onwards, Arab traders frequently navigated through this archipelago – for example, foreign merchants, such as Sulāyman al-Tājir and Al-Mas'ūdī, passed through and established active trade relations with Maldives in the past. The renowned Chinese admiral Zheng He's visits to Maldives, during his expeditions in 1411 and 1430, underscored the island nations' strategic role in the Indian Ocean trade networks linking China and the African Continent.¹

Maldives hosts a large ocean area – i.e., over 98 per cent of its territory is ocean – covering high maritime traffic. This increases the potential for Maldives to encounter oil spills from tankers and cargo vessels. Oil-based pollution can create ripples damaging its ocean resources, from killing corals to threatening marine life supporting local food security. This analysis explores local and regional oil spill-related

incidence and Maldives' approach to addressing them.

Maritime Incidents in Maldives

In June 2014, the Vietnamese-flagged bulk carrier MV *Viet Long*, loaded with a substantial quantity of bunker oil, was aground close to the Summer Island Village resort in Kaafu Atoll (a tourist resort island near Malé).² A small amount of oil was released into the nearby waters. While the vessel was being towed to Colombo for repairs, since Maldives does not house a docking facility for large vessels, the vessel ultimately sank to the east of Kaafu Atoll.

In August 2016, the MV *NGOC Son* ran aground on the southwestern reef of Fuvahmulah island (Gnaviyani Atoll).³ It was carrying a significant quantity of bunker fuel. Shortly after the grounding, the island's residents reported the appearance of oil residues along their island's shoreline. The leakage was traced back to the vessel.

This analysis's author, who served as the on-scene commander at the time with the MNDF Coast Guard, was directly involved in coordinating containment and clean-up operations. A Singaporean salvage firm (SMIT/Boskalis salvage team operating from its Singapore emergency-response centre) was engaged in sealing the leak. Unfortunately, during its subsequent towing away from the reef, the vessel sank south of Addu Atoll (southwest of the island of Fuvamulah).

On 18 August 2021, the Panama-flagged supermax bulk carrier MV *Navios Amaryllis* ran aground near Kaafu Rasfari reef while sailing from India to South Africa. Although no incident of any oil spill came to light, the vessel that was then transporting an estimated 1,600 tons of bunker fuel and lubricants potentially presented a considerable environmental hazard at the time.⁴

Small States' Threat Narratives

These incidents demonstrate potential risks to Maldives arising from the seas close and afar. The vessels traversing Maldives, occasionally causing local oil pollution, do not originate from or belong to the local islands. The potential threat arises from foreign ocean and land territories. This setting has

shaped the existing mitigation and problem-solving efforts in Maldives.

For example, Maldives lacks access to adequate resources to manage major oil spills. Potentially, the damage could be disastrous and could lead to an existential crisis. At the local level, Maldives is likely to declare oil spill-based pollution as a security threat and set a national strategy to address the threat at sea.

Considering the limited resources, Maldives has navigated problem-solving with regional partners.

By cementing its existing engagements and partnerships with donors and regional partners, Maldives can negotiate resource-sharing mechanisms to support local anti-pollution plans as a national security matter. For example, the DOSTI maritime security exercises between Maldives, India, and Sri Lanka are foundational to such arrangements.

Mapping Maldives' Efforts – Challenges to Strategy

In 2014, the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) commenced the development of a National Oil Spill Contingency Plan (NOSCP). The effort was supported by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). Further, the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), under the aegis of the US Army Corps of Engineers, collaborated with the Maldivian institutions to carry out Environmental Sensitivity Index (ESI) mapping in Laamu Atoll. This exercise generated vital data on ecological, socio-economic, and shoreline resources, which are fundamental to contingency planning, prioritisation, and effective response operations.

The NOSCP has not been finalised yet.

The MNDF Coast Guard serves as the leading agency for ensuring oil spill response in Maldives. Although no large-scale oil spill has occurred to date along the vast coastline of Maldives, the Coast Guard has continued to effectively respond to minor incidents.⁵ In August 2020, the Government of Japan strengthened national capacity by donating oil spill response equipment worth JPY 300 million (USD 2.8 million),

subsequently allocated across the four MNDF area commands.

This equipment will not be enough if there is a large oil spill in the future.

Maldives has been undertaking ongoing efforts to navigate potential challenges caused by a foreign-based oil spill. The policy significance has grown among national security actors – i.e., Maldives should focus on strengthening contingency planning, capacity building, and regional cooperation. For example, in the case of MV *Wakashio*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs framed the incident as a regional ecological crisis and expressed explicit solidarity, signalling that Maldives saw the *Wakashio* spill as relevant beyond Mauritius' borders (i.e., a warning for all Indian Ocean small island states).⁶

The MV *Wakashio* spill in Mauritius exposed significant gaps in preparedness and response capacity for small island states, from which Maldives must learn. For example, Mauritius did not have a fully resourced National Oil Spill Contingency Plan, and the available equipment was insufficient to manage an oil spill of the suggested scale. While Maldives has been fortunate to avoid a major spill thus far, the risk remains imminent given the increasing maritime trade flows and the ecological fragility of coral reef systems.

Conclusion: Roadmap for the Future

This preparedness and response planning can manifest itself, in Maldives, learning lessons from past maritime disasters in the region while taking proactive measures to strengthen its preparedness mechanisms to counter major oil spills. Forging Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with regional maritime partners would enable timely assistance in recovery and cleanup operations, ensuring that the nation is not left vulnerable in the event of a catastrophic spill.

Annexure -1:

Maldives is a signatory to a number of International Maritime Conventions that counter pollution and ensure an effective response. They are listed below:⁷

Convention Name	Maldives' Status	Depositary Reference / Date
MARPOL 73/78 Annex III (Harmful Substances)	Party	IMO Status of Conventions
MARPOL 73/78 Annex IV (Sewage)	Party	IMO Status of Conventions
MARPOL 73/78 Annex V (Garbage)	Party	IMO Status of Conventions
MARPOL 73/78 Annex VI (Air Pollution)	Party	IMO Status of Conventions
OPRC 1990 (Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation)	Party	IMO Status of Conventions
CLC 1992 (Civil Liability for Oil Pollution Damage)	Party	Depositary: IMO, Accession Date: 2005
FUND 1992 (International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund)	Party	Depositary: IMO, Accession Date: 2005
BUNKER 2001 (Bunker Oil Pollution Damage)	Party	Depositary: IMO, Accession Date: 2005
HNS Convention (Hazardous and Noxious Substances)	Not in force	Not yet ratified by Maldives
Regional MoU (South Asia Seas Oil & Chemical Spill Response)	Signatory	SACEP/SASP MoU, signed pre-2015

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), with 20+ years of experience in the maritime domain. He also has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that the statements, opinions and arguments made are his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policies and position.

political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

3. Maldives Independent. (2025). Environment agency proposes record MVR633 million fine for reef damage.
4. SunOnline International. (2021). MV Navios Amaryllis was traveling when it ran aground on a reef.
5. Ras Online. (2023). Oil spill cleared from Malé coastal area; 15 barrels of oil cleared.
6. UNCTAD. (2020). Mauritius oil spill highlights importance of adopting latest international legal instruments in the field.
7. International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation. (2025). Maldives. *ITOPF Knowledge Resources*.

1. Yang, B. (2024). Discovered but forgotten: The Maldives in Chinese history, c. 1100–1620. *Columbia University Press*.
2. Splash247. (2014). Maldives hands out record fine to Vietnamese owner.

Navigating Geopolitical Currents: Small States' Maritime Strategy and Domain Awareness in the Indo-Pacific

By Col Amanulla Ahmed Rasheed
Analysis

Published in MSO, 7 October 2025

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a central theatre of geopolitical contestation between great powers, particularly in the maritime domain. As India and China recalibrate their foreign policy postures, their strategic engagements in the Indian Ocean territories have profound implications for regional maritime security.¹ Maritime strategy and maritime domain awareness (MDA) are increasingly vital tools for small states like Maldives. They must navigate the complexities of great power rivalry while safeguarding national sovereignty and economic interests.

This analysis looks at the evolving maritime strategies of India and China, the implications of their bilateral relations, and the strategic responses of Maldives as a case study in small-state agency and resilience.

Maritime Strategy and Domain Awareness: Conceptual Foundations

Maritime strategy encompasses the deployment of naval power, diplomatic engagement, and economic instruments to secure national interests at sea. It is inherently multidimensional, involving deterrence, power projection, sea control, and maritime governance. MDA refers to the effective understanding of maritime activities that could impact national security, safety, economy, or environment. It integrates surveillance, intelligence, and data analytics to monitor and respond to maritime threats.

MDA in Maldives is evolving through the integration of civil and military surveillance systems, including radar networks and UAVs. These layers of information are fused into a common operating picture, incorporating information from maritime platforms such as MNDF, fishermen, utility vessels,

radars, satellite imageries, UAVs, and white shipping data. The Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) exemplify regional and national efforts to enhance situational awareness.

Academic institutions, like The Maldives National University (MNU), have a pivotal role in this transformation. By leveraging big data analytics, MNU provides research platforms to support evidence-based maritime projects and link research with operational capabilities.² Academic platforms can foster transparency, ethical data use, and multidisciplinary collaboration, crucial for small states navigating complex maritime information.

However, for small states, MDA is not merely a technical capability but a strategic necessity. With vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) – for example, over 98 per cent of Maldives' territory is ocean –, and limited naval assets, these states rely on regional cooperation, technological innovation, and diplomatic agility to maintain maritime security. With geopolitical shifts between great powers, small states must navigate global and regional political currents and build mutual partnerships advancing national and regional security.

India-China Maritime Dynamics: Strategic Shifts

India and China, as dominant actors in the Indo-Pacific, have adopted divergent maritime strategies shaped by historical legacies, economic imperatives, and strategic ambitions. India's maritime doctrine emphasises a "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) approach, prioritising cooperative security and regional stability. China, meanwhile, pursues a more assertive posture through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expanding its naval footprint and infrastructure investments across the Indian Ocean.

Recent diplomatic engagements suggest a nuanced recalibration. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China, in August 2025, for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, and meeting with China's President Xi Jinping, signals a willingness to engage in strategic dialogue despite unresolved border tensions.³ For Maldives, this convergence of diplomacy and strategic dialogue – i.e., at least in the immediate term

– opens uncontested space to deepen ties with both powers and uphold the Government’s balanced foreign policy.⁴

The Maldives: A Strategic Case Study

Maldives occupies a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean. Its EEZ spans approximately 923,322 km², intersected by critical shipping lanes such as the Eight Degree Channel and the Equatorial Channel. This geography renders Maldives both strategically significant and, although with vulnerabilities, a responsible regional actor to address maritime threats, including piracy, illegal fishing, and environmental disasters.

Historically, India has been an unwavering defence partner to Maldives – for example, India’s Operation Cactus, in 1988, supported Maldives defeating an attack by a foreign mercenary-terrorist group. As part of strengthening the ongoing engagement, India has committed to the joint maritime exercises, such as DOSTI and Ekuverin, since the 1990s. These engagements have fostered interoperability, trust, and regional solidarity. The 2016 Comprehensive Action Plan for Defence formalised bilateral cooperation, encompassing logistics, training, and maritime surveillance.⁵

Prime Minister Modi’s July 2025 visit to Maldives, joining President Dr Mohamed Muizzu and the First Lady, “in observing a military parade held in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Maldives’ independence”, is a testimony to the further strengthening of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Beyond immediate neighbours, Maldives has diversified its partnerships, for example, by introducing Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones and receiving patrol vessels from Australia and Türkiye. These assets enhance its maritime surveillance and monitoring capabilities. This includes strengthening the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) capabilities, reinforcing its strategic autonomy and interoperability.

Maldives engagements with China are not new and have promoted both economic and security interests. These engagements span infrastructure development, climate cooperation, and building a digital economy. For example, the recent Rasmalé

land reclamation project would be a part of the ongoing efforts to support Maldives’ developments. Under the Belt and Road initiative, Maldives has benefited from building mega infrastructures such as the Maldives-China Friendship Bridge, opened in 2018, connecting the capital island Malé, the airport island and the second largest residential island near Malé. Increasing connectivity between the airport and 2 densely residential islands, thereby adding to the economy of Maldives. President Mohamed Muizzu’s visits to China in 2024 and 2025 reaffirm the Maldives-China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.

Embracing a Regional Strategy

In these viewpoints, small states must consider that, while it is essential, globalised naval support can potentially risk transforming the region into a theatre of great power competition.

Maldives maintains a balance and stresses national priorities in establishing development and security partnerships. Maintaining diplomacy and dialogue in defence policy and military cooperation, especially with maritime states, can help build the capabilities of maritime security agencies and navigate regional frameworks.

Maldives already participates and contributes to multilateral forums like the SCO, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Colombo Security Conclave, reflecting a deliberate strategy to amplify its voice and influence through dialogue and partnership.

In addition, the Western Indian Ocean hosts several cooperative frameworks, including the Djibouti Code of Conduct, Combined Maritime Forces, and the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA). For Maldives, such frameworks can be a crucial part of its regional strategy – i.e., potential challenges for collaboration, such as resources and capacity shortcomings, can be negotiated through mutual engagements.

Furthermore, institutions such as the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) and the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA) offer platforms for confidence-building and coordination, but require sustained support and inclusivity.⁶

Conclusion

Today, the India-China relationship presents both challenges and opportunities for the maritime strategy for Maldives. Strategic clarity, technological innovation, and diplomatic agility are essential to navigate this complex environment. A strategy for enhancing MDA is required, and diversifying partnerships by leveraging academic and regional platforms is essential for building Maldives' national and regional MDA capabilities.

Large ocean states, like Maldives or the Pacific Islands, can offer strategic knowledge platforms. Their ability to balance sovereignty with cooperation, development with security, and national interests with regional stability will help shape country strategies, addressing mutual interests at sea.

Author

Col Amanulla Ahmed Rasheed is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). He has two postgraduate degrees, in Management from Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka and Art and Science in Warfare from the National Defence University, Pakistan. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policy and position.

-
1. Vajiram & Ravi. (2024). India's China challenge in the Indian Ocean: Strategic contest for primacy
 2. Rasheed, A. A., & Shareef, A. F. (2025). Connecting the dots: Navigating big data analytics for maritime security through academic platforms in the Maldives. *Maldives Security Outlook*.
 3. Bicker, L., McDonell, S., & Kupemba, D. N. (2025). China and India pledge to be partners not rivals. *BBC News*.
 4. Rasheed, A. A. (2025). Maldives-China strategic ties, a continuing engagement. *Maldives Security Outlook*.
 5. Rasheed, A. A. (2025). Defence cooperation forges stronger regional alliances – Small states' strategy. *Maldives Security Outlook*.

6. Bueger, C. (2025). Maritime security dilemmas: The Indian Ocean islands and the quest for regional stability.

China's Global Security Initiative Through the Maldives' Lens

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 19 September 2025

On 16 September 2025, the analysis's author participated in a strategic dialogue in Beijing with Sun Haiyan, Vice Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC), alongside South and Southeast Asian delegates. The session provided firsthand insights into China's evolving security doctrine. Particularly, the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and its implications for small states like Maldives were of interest to author.

Introduction

China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), launched by China's President Xi Jinping in 2022, represents a strategic recalibration of global security norms. Positioned alongside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), GSI emphasises cooperative security, sovereignty, and development as interlinked pillars of regional stability.¹

For small states like Maldives – situated at the nexus of Indian Ocean maritime routes – the implications are both promising and complex.

During author's participation in the CPC-led dialogue in Beijing, GSI was framed as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, designed to foster collective and mutual security engagements across South and Southeast Asia. The initiative was presented not merely as a military or great-power strategy, but as a multidimensional framework encompassing comprehensive security, including food security, climate resilience, and diplomatic capacity-building.

Analysing GSI through the lens of Maldives, one could argue that while it offers new avenues for regional integration and strategic partnerships, it also challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and small-state autonomy. By situating Maldives

within China's broader regional calculus, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how small states navigate emerging global initiatives and recalibrate their foreign policy in response to shifting geopolitical tides.

Conceptual Framing

GSI is conceptually grounded in key principles: common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; respect for sovereignty; and peaceful dispute resolution. GSI promotes a development-security nexus—arguing that economic growth and infrastructure connectivity are foundational to peace.

Author's engagement in CPC-led discussions highlighted the importance of expanding the definition of security beyond military dimensions. The Vice Minister emphasised areas such as food security, climate change, and digital governance as integral to GSI's scope. This aligns with China's narrative of "win-win cooperation," where strategic investments are framed as mutually beneficial rather than coercive.²

For Maldives, this conceptual framing is significant. As a small state with limited hard power, its security priorities are deeply intertwined with climate resilience, maritime governance, and economic diversification. GSI's emphasis on inclusive dialogue and regional stability resonates with Maldives' diplomatic norms, particularly its commitment to multilateralism and constructive engagement – i.e., Maldives' construction of climate security narratives empathises this small state's agency.

Analytically, China's dual-track approach, separating BRI as an economic strategy and GSI as a security framework, creates layered incentives for small states. While BRI projects in Maldives have focused on infrastructure and development, GSI's closer regional initiatives can introduce potential dimensions of strategic alignment, including defence cooperation, maritime surveillance, and military and diplomatic training, with the Indian Ocean small state.

GSI's regional framework can add to Maldives' national priorities in navigating regional partnerships, playing an active role in building

mutual regional security dialogue, and balancing sovereignty with strategic interdependence.

GSI's National and Regional Dimensions

GSI reflects China's ambition to shape a common security environment conducive to its rise as a global leader, promoting lasting peace. GSI reinforces the CPC's narrative of stability through development, projecting internal governance models as templates for international cooperation.

During the September 2025 dialogue, the Vice Minister emphasised GSI's role in fostering mutual security dialogues across South and Southeast Asia. For example, GSI can offer a platform for less-resourced states to engage in regional security dialogues.

However, for meaningful participation, transparent and mutually respectful narratives must guide bilateral engagements. While full multilateralism is ideal, inclusive regional dialogue – such as Maldives-India cooperation, extending regional priorities – should be anchored in broadening the role of Maldives. Regional engagements must prioritise trust-building, shared interests, and equitable representation.³

GSI's approach is not only inclusive but also can work to foster partnerships that empower the Indian Ocean small states to extend their commitment to regional stability and support the broader regional security efforts. For example, GSI can complement China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes strategic port investments in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti (Africa). These nodes serve both economic and military functions, enabling China to expand its naval footprint and secure maritime trade routes.

Maldives, with its geostrategic location and history of non-alignment, projects a potential critical posture in this architecture. However, in moving forward, Maldives must prioritise national interests. While GSI offers tangible benefits – such as training, technology transfer, and crisis response – it also raises concerns about dependency, transparency, and strategic leverage, and Maldives can have an agential role in this.

Small States' Role Beyond the Indian Ocean

While Maldives is often viewed through the prism of Indian Ocean geopolitics, its engagement with regional platforms, such as GSI, can signal the broader role for small states in shaping global security discourse. China's framing of GSI as an international initiative accessible to all countries opens space for small states to assert agency beyond their immediate regions.

Author's participation in CPC-led discussions signals Maldives' capacity for diplomacy and constructive dialogue, through academic and civic engagements, within broader Asian security frameworks. This reflects a growing recognition of small states as norm entrepreneurs – able to influence agenda-setting and mediate tensions in multilateral forums.

Small states bring unique assets to the GSI framework: moral authority, diplomatic agility, and strategic neutrality. Maldives, for instance, has demonstrated leadership in climate diplomacy, maritime governance, and regional cooperation. Hypothetically, its potential involvement in Southeast Asian security discussions and South China Sea negotiations, through unique knowledge on multilateralism, can illustrate the expansive role of small states.

China's outreach to small states under BRI and GSI is not merely symbolic. It reflects a strategic calculus where influence is built through partnerships that are less encumbered by historical rivalries or alliance politics. For Maldives, this presents opportunities to diversify its security partnerships, enhance institutional capacity, and contribute to regional stability.

However, it also demands vigilance: ensuring that engagement does not compromise sovereignty or entrench asymmetrical dependencies. By aligning selectively with GSI principles while maintaining strategic autonomy, small states can navigate the evolving security landscape with resilience and purpose.

Maldives' development, defence and security engagements with regional and extra-regional partners already resemble and emphasise the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and

territorial integrity. The Government's approach to balanced foreign policy – i.e., for example, Maldives' extending military cooperation with Türkiye, including the introduction of Türkiye-made drones, complementary to its ongoing maritime security exercises with India and Sri Lanka, is indicative.⁴ In 2025, Australia pledged to gift a steel-hulled Guardian-class Patrol Boat – designed and constructed by Austal Australia – to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). This not only enhances Maldives-Australia defence cooperation but also bolsters the MNDF Coast Guard's interoperability, creating capabilities to further participation and contribute to the regional security architecture.

Maldives' experience offers a template for other small states seeking to engage constructively with emerging global initiatives without forfeiting their core interests.

Conclusion

Potential engagements with China's GSI dialogue do not undermine Maldives' foreign policy objectives in the region. GSI can offer both opportunities and challenges – inviting deeper engagement in regional and global diplomacy while testing the boundaries of sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Author's firsthand engagement with CPC officials highlighted the initiative's multidimensional scope, encompassing climate, food, and maritime security. By critically assessing GSI's conceptual framing, national implementation, and regional outreach, this analysis emphasises small states' agency in shaping inclusive, resilient, and balanced security architectures – not their material limitations.

Author

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

1. Chinese Government. (2023). Jointly Implementing the Global Security Initiative for Lasting Peace and Security of the World.
2. Chinese Government. (2022). Wang Yi: Win-win Cooperation Should Remain the Goal China and the United States Both Pursue.
3. Rasheed, A. (2025). Changing tides in Maldives-India strategic cooperation. *East Asia Forum*.
4. Rasheed, A. A. (2024). Maldives strategy in the Indo-Pacific. *Royal Society for Asian Affairs*.

Assessing the Dual Threat: Safety and Security Implications of Floating Armouries for Maldivian Waters

By Lt Col Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 3 September 2025

Introduction

Floating armouries around Maldivian waters can potentially pose a significant environmental and security risk to Maldives.

Positioned in the heart of the Indian Ocean, Maldives occupies a pivotal location along the major eastern and western shipping routes, linking the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal in the northwest and the Strait of Malacca in East Asia. Its proximity to the Arabian Sea and the western gateways to Southeast Asia makes it a vital maritime crossroad and a potential chokepoint for overseeing and influencing regional vessel movements, including those carrying weapons.

This analysis highlights the potential security implications and challenges linked to floating armouries for Maldives.

Adverse Impact of Floating Armouries

Floating armouries are commercially owned, modified vessels that store weapons, ammunition, equipment, and basic supplies, often anchored in international waters and used as logistic support vessels.¹ Concentrated mainly in the Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and Indian Ocean, these ships are typically converted from tugs, research vessels, or patrol boats. Around two dozen such vessels

operate under various flags, including those of the Cook Islands, Djibouti, Mongolia, Panama, Sri Lanka, Togo, UAE, and the United Kingdom (UK).

Since 2005, a major shipping corridor in the Indian Ocean – near Sri Lanka, Somalia, Oman, and Djibouti – has been designated a piracy High Risk Area (HRA).² Despite naval deployments by conventional powers such as Russia, China, NATO, and the EU, piracy remains a serious concern for shippers. To protect their vessels, many turn to Private Maritime Security Companies (PMSCs). However, international and domestic arms trade laws often restrict these companies from entering foreign ports with weapons, creating logistical and legal challenges for armed maritime security.

Under Article 2 of UNCLOS, coastal states have sovereignty over their territorial waters and can prohibit foreign ships from entering with weapons. However, no such restrictions apply in international waters as per Article 87 of UNCLOS, allowing the rise of floating armouries.

As a result, floating armouries commenced operations in international waters (legal grey area) with minimal oversight, inconsistent vessel registration, and no public records on their operators or weapon stockpiles, leading to a lack of transparency and accountability.

Some floating armouries operate roughly 30 nautical miles offshore, deliberately staying beyond Maldives' 12-nautical-mile territorial limit to remain in international waters and bypass both national and international regulations. Maldives lacks resources to carry out continuous surveillance work, potentially enabling these armouries to avoid oversight to effectively prevent potential leaking of illegal activities into its territorial waters.

Security Dilemma in the Maritime Domain

On November 3, 1988, nearly 80 armed members of Sri Lanka's PLOTE hijacked the Maldivian cargo vessel *MV Progress Light* after they attempted to seize control of the capital city of Malé.³ Though the bid was unsuccessful, the incident revealed the vulnerability of Maldives' maritime borders (especially in the 1980s) and highlights the need for stronger security measures to safeguard the maritime boundary.

Currently, Maldives has sophisticated technology platforms and well-trained military personnel – for example, in 2024, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) launched Türkiye-supplied tactical drones to support monitoring and surveillance activity at sea. However, with limited resources (and multiple challenges the country faces with climate change), the capability of the MNDF Coast Guard to ensure the safety of the foreign (mostly unknown) floating armouries near Maldivian waters, especially against pirates, would seem a challenge – i.e., if inadequately protected, such vessels can be attacked by criminals at sea and turned into security risks. Their stockpiles can also supply weapons to non-state actors, increasing potential threats to sea users in Maldives.

Challenges in Ensuring Safety at Sea

Many of these armouries – often consisting of ageing cargo ships or decommissioned vessels – can fail to meet current International Maritime Organisation (IMO) safety requirements. These vessels often remain anchored in international waters and avoid entering key ports. As a result, they are not subjected to Port State Control (PSC) inspections, which serve as the primary mechanism for ensuring compliance with international maritime safety regulations such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

In the absence of such inspections, there is little assurance that these vessels adhere to the required international standards for ship construction, equipment, and operational safety. This regulatory gap raises serious concerns about the seaworthiness of floating armouries and the risks they may pose to both the marine environment and maritime security.

Within the Indian Ocean Region, the MV *Express Pearl* incident off the coast of Sri Lanka highlight the potential risks posed to Maldives by incidents at sea – the potential impacts range from pollution to health risks. Failure to comply with SOLAS Convention can increase the chances of floating armories causing harmful incidents at sea.

Floating armouries within Maldives' Search and Rescue Region (SRR) present significant operational challenges. For example, on 18 May 2017, the

Maldivian landing craft *Maria-3* went missing amid severe weather conditions while it was en route to the central atolls. Despite prompt efforts by MNDF Coast Guard to locate the vessel, the search was hindered by the limitations of deploying larger Search and Rescue (SAR) vessels in such rough seas.⁴

The breakthrough came when an Indian Navy vessel, in Maldives on an official visit, successfully located *Maria-3* and ensured the safety of all six individuals onboard. This incident demonstrates the need for the MNDF to acquire critical craft to support its own capacity and mission-readiness.

The MNDF Coast Guard relies primarily on small vessels with restricted endurance, capacity, and equipment, making it difficult to conduct large-scale or long-duration rescue operations at sea. This limitation not only complicates timely responses but also increases the risk to human life and maritime safety within Maldivian waters.

Regional Mechanisms – opportunities and challenges

In 2011, IMO recommended that coastal states bordering key maritime regions, such as the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, and Red Sea, develop policies to facilitate the movement of private armed guards and their equipment. IMO also issued guidelines for ship owners and private maritime security companies to carry armed guards and weapons onboard vessels. However, despite these recommendations, there is no unified standard operating procedure or agreed-upon practice among flag states and coastal states for handling the carriage, boarding, disembarkation, or storage of maritime private security arms.

Maldives can assist in formulating new regulations and guidelines by engaging with regional actors, including bilateral partners – i.e., engaging in scaling trilateral combined exercises such as the Exercise DOSTI carried out by Maldives, Sri Lanka and India, to further build capacity to ensure pooling and sharing of resources and better navigate maritime security in and beyond the territorial waters. Such arrangements will effectively enhance small states' efforts in not only managing floating armouries within their range, but also to set rules for their

operational safety and protection against regional threats at sea.

Conclusion

Floating armouries in Maldivian waters pose clear environmental and security threats. Without strong regulation, their presence risks undermining both national security and the fragile marine ecosystem, making it crucial for Maldives to address this issue proactively. Regional actors, such as Sri Lanka and India, can collaborate with Maldives and play a pivotal role in urging international organisations, including the United Nations, to recognise the risks posed by floating armouries. By collectively advocating for stronger oversight and comprehensive regulatory frameworks, small states can help ensure that the challenges associated with floating armouries are addressed in a manner that enhances both regional security and global maritime governance.

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). He has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policy and position.

-
1. Kaur, P. (2016). Floating Armouries and International Law. *ISIL Occasional Papers*.
 2. Wilpon, A. (2017). Floating armories: A legal grey area in arms trade and the law of the sea. *Georgetown Journal of International Law*, 48(3), 873–893.
 3. Shaahunaz, F. (2016, November 3). Operation Cactus: The other side of 1988 coup (Part 3).
 4. Maldives Independent. (2016, November 3). Missing landing craft found by Indian Navy plane.
-

Maldives–China Strategic Ties, a Continuing Engagement

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 2 September 2025

Introduction

Maldives' President Dr Mohamed Muizzu's visit to China on 31 August 2025 and his renewed endorsement of the Maldives-China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2024–2028) mark a strategic moment in Maldives' foreign policy.¹ This reaffirmation signals an open diplomatic posture toward extra-regional actors, particularly China, while maintaining a firm commitment to Indian Ocean security.

As a small state, Maldives must navigate complex geopolitical currents with strategic clarity. Engaging with non-traditional security actors like China requires not only diplomatic finesse but also a responsible role in regional security dialogues. Recent efforts to build maritime interoperability on regional security missions – such as the introduction of Türkiye-supplied drones and TCG Volkan (P-343) warship and announcement of Australia-gifted Guardian-class Patrol Boat – demonstrate Maldives' pragmatic approach to maritime security cooperation.²

Muizzu's visit narrates a broader strategic vision – i.e., diplomacy and dialogue as tools for navigating national interests through the regional complexity and expanding strategic partnerships.

Agents of Navigation, Small States in International Relations

Small states are often perceived as vulnerable actors in international relations due to their limited material capabilities and susceptibility to external shocks.

Theorists like John Mearsheimer argue that, even in an anarchic system, states pursue survival through strategic balancing. Alexander Wendt emphasises the role of identity, norms, and social structures in shaping state behaviour. Small states may not directly influence great powers, but they do have a level of agency, built on a vulnerability identity and

diplomatic narratives, to pursue strategic dialogue in engaging with like-minded partners on defence and security issues.

Maldives can construct its own security and development narratives – i.e., it does not need merely to react to external pressures but shape its foreign policy position based on its interests.

Through initiatives in climate diplomacy, maritime security, and regional governance, Maldives asserts agency in the Indo-Pacific. Its participation in multilateral forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, and now the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reflects a deliberate strategy to amplify its voice and influence.

With China, a Strategic Friendship?

Maldives' engagement with China is both developmental and strategic. Maldives must avoid entanglement in great power rivalries while securing its national interests. For Maldives, with China, it is not merely a transactional relationship but a layered engagement across infrastructure, climate, digital economy, education, and security.

During President Muizzu's January 2024 state visit to Beijing, 20 bilateral agreements were signed, forming the backbone of this strategic partnership. Areas covered include:³

- **Infrastructure & Urban Development:** The Rasmalé land reclamation and housing project – Maldives' largest housing initiative – was launched with Chinese grant assistance. This reclamation project is estimated to cost USD 500 million.
- **Climate & Environmental Cooperation:** Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on green and low-carbon development was signed to support Maldives' climate adaptation goals.
- **Digital Economy:** Strengthening investment cooperation in the digital economy reflects China's support for Maldives' digital transformation.
- **Education & Human Resource Development:** Expanded scholarships,

training programs, and institutional exchanges were formalised.

- **Health & Agriculture:** Technical cooperation on pest control, food security, and equipping 17 health facilities with Chinese laboratory technology was initiated.
- **Media:** A MoU between China Xinhua News Agency and Maldives Public Service Media (PSM) promotes content sharing and public diplomacy.

For Maldives, this strategic friendship with China complements Maldives' ongoing engagements with India, Australia, the United States and Turkey, for that matter. It reflects Maldives' multidimensional diplomacy – a calibrated approach to securing national interests while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Implications for Regional Dialogue

Maldives' presence at the August 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, China, coincided with a significant diplomatic development – India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to China and his meeting with China's President Xi Jinping highlights this.⁴ Despite persistent border tensions, both leaders signalled a willingness to recalibrate their foreign policy stances.

This evolving alignment opens space for other Indian Ocean states, including Maldives, to bolster strategic dialogues without being perceived as disruptive. Modi's engagement with Xi indicates that even amid unresolved disputes, strategic convergence on shared interests is possible. For Maldives, this creates diplomatic room to deepen ties with China while maintaining constructive relations with India.

The optics of Muizzu's second visit to China – less than two years after his first – are now interpreted through a different lens. In January 2024, the visit was viewed by some regional observers as a pivot. In August 2025, it appears more aligned with a broader regional trend of pragmatic engagement. India's own participation in SCO dialogues and its cooperative stance toward China on shared platforms signal a recalibration that benefits smaller states.

In the SCO, Maldives showed enthusiasm and willingness to observe China's role in changing global trends. In his statement, Muizzu emphasised:

I commend China's commitment to reforming global governance, tackling global challenges, and supporting developing countries. Rooted in the U.N. Charter, the initiative underscores the need for a system based on international law. The Maldives strongly supports this initiative. In an increasingly interconnected world, stronger cooperation is key to building a more just, peaceful, and inclusive global order.

Conclusion

Maldives' reaffirmation of support for the Maldives-China strategic cooperation during the SCO Summit was not a deviation but a continuation of its strategic narrative – i.e., openness, multilateralism, and pragmatic engagement. Maldives asserts its relevance, not through power, but through presence, purpose and dialogue.

Authors

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

-
1. The President's Office. (2025, August 31). *President meets President of the People's Republic of China.*
 2. Australian Government. (2025). Joint media release: Maldives to receive Guardian-class patrol boat from Australia
 3. The President's Office. (2024). Key agreements exchanged between the Maldives and China.
 4. The Hindu. (2025, December 19). PM Modi-Xi Jinping meeting: India, China should handle ties from long-term perspective, says Chinese President.
-

Shaping Energy Security Discourse in Maldives: Culture, Environment and Geopolitics

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed & Ms. Aminath Shazly
Analysis

Published in MSO, 7 August 2025

Introduction

Maldives faces an existential threat from climate change. With an average elevation of just 1.5 meters above sea level, even a modest rise in sea level could inundate most of its archipelago.

This looming threat has catalysed a shift in national discourse, where energy security is increasingly framed not merely as a technical or economic concern, but as a matter of survival. The fear of sinking has generated widespread public anxiety and policy urgency, compelling the government to address societal vulnerabilities and reinforce national security.

Understanding how Maldives navigates its internal and external climate vulnerabilities is essential to grasp the evolving role of energy in its national security discourse. This process involves balancing domestic needs with foreign policy priorities, including development cooperation with competing aid partners. Yet, the country's culture, identity, and environmental realities remain central to shaping its energy security discourse.

Security in a Broader Threat and Safety Spectrum

Security in Maldives encompasses a spectrum of threats beyond conventional military concerns. In small states, environmental degradation, tropical cyclones, and coastal erosion are increasingly viewed as national security issues, threatening cultural heritage, displacing communities and eroding traditional ways of life.¹

Maldives' vulnerability is compounded by its reliance on imported fossil fuels, which not only contribute to global emissions but also expose the country to market volatility and supply disruptions.²

In Maldives, energy security is deeply intertwined with climate resilience. The Government's response has included land reclamation projects and the

development of “safe islands” designed to withstand environmental shocks and host critical infrastructure that can support renewable energy projects.

This securitisation of energy usage – framing it as essential to national survival – has elevated energy policy to a strategic priority.³ Aiming to address this, small states view climate change not just as an environmental issue but as a geopolitical and sustainable development challenge.

Conceptual Base: Domestic and Regional Influences

Both domestic and regional factors shape energy security policy in small states. Domestically, discourse emerges from community-level interactions with environmental and infrastructural challenges.

For instance, in Tuvalu, rising seas and partial inundation threaten energy infrastructure, prompting calls for resilient and raised systems to protect the energy supply – i.e., a mere impact of a tropical cyclone could destroy potential infrastructure to build renewable energy on the island.

Regionally, small states often rely on external aid to implement energy and climate strategies. In the Pacific, Australia has played a key role in supporting countries like Tuvalu. However, aid relationships are not static. The Solomon Islands, for example, has aimed to balance its ties between Australia, China, and the United States to maximise development assistance.⁴ This dynamic creates tension among big donors, leading to a loss of focus on national priorities.

Maldives has experienced similar complexities in its development cooperation, particularly in navigating relations between India and China. However, key drivers of foreign policy are strongly embedded in culture-based domestic factors.

Cultural Impact on Energy Security

Is renewable energy the solution for Maldives’ climate-induced energy challenges? Increasingly, yes—but not without cultural and societal considerations. The linkage between energy usage

and climate vulnerability has led to the securitisation of renewable energy in national and local narratives. Renewable energy is portrayed not just as a sustainable alternative, but as a lifeline for the nation’s survival.

Hanimaadhoo (a Maldivian island) study by Zama, Suzuki, and Shazly offers empirical insights into how cultural worldviews influence energy perceptions.⁵

Egalitarian respondents viewed renewable energy – particularly solar and ocean energy – as essential for mitigating climate threats and preserving national identity. Their support was rooted in both economic rationale and environmental ethics.

Hierarchists emphasised the role of government in managing energy transitions, reflecting trust in institutional authority. Fatalists, while less engaged, acknowledged the inevitability of environmental change, reinforcing the perception of climate threats as uncontrollable. These cultural orientations shape public expectations and influence policy design.

The demand for climate-resilient infrastructure has driven the Government action. Land reclamation and the construction of elevated islands are seen as necessary to protect societal utilities, including energy systems, offering a platform for deploying renewable energy technologies with reduced exposure to sea-level rise and storm surges.

However, implementing such projects requires careful navigation of geopolitical complexities, particularly those related to securing development financing. For example, Maldives’ foreign policy on development cooperation has shifted between India and China. Often, a shift toward China has raised potential concerns for the Indo-Pacific security actors, including India. Despite such regional security concerns, Maldives has not viewed its foreign partnerships in terms of meeting regional security. Primarily, it has extended foreign investment projects with India and China, primarily focused on mega-development projects such as the land reclamation work.

Aid from India and China comes with strategic conditions, designed to maximise the big regional powers’ presence in the island nations’ territory. Therefore, Maldives must balance these relationships to secure the best outcomes.

Conclusion

Securitising energy usage in Maldives is a multifaceted process, rooted in domestic discourse and shaped by regional dynamics. While local communities drive the urgency for renewable energy through lived experiences of climate change, foreign policy considerations influence the pace and direction of government action.

Maldives depends heavily on external aid, and the strategic interests of donor countries can distort or delay national priorities. Despite the existential nature of climate threats, governments must navigate complex diplomatic landscapes to secure funding, technology, and infrastructure.

Maldives' energy security discourse is a reflection of its cultural identity, environmental reality, and geopolitical position. In framing energy as a national security issue, the country must seek careful balancing of internal needs and external pressures, ensuring that energy transitions serve both survival and sovereignty.

Authors

Ms Aminath Shazly is a Senior Lecturer at FEST, MNU, and has a master's in environmental management, specialising in Natural Resources Management from the University of Queensland, Australia. She has an Undergraduate degree in Secondary teaching, specialising in Biology & Marine Science. She has over 12 years of academic experience in Environmental Management and Sustainable Development. She has worked with different government sectors, regional & local NGOs to conduct capacity building workshops on Sustainable development, Environmental resource management and Climate Change.

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

1. Naupa, A. (2023). Cultural security in the Pacific: Why it matters for regional security. *The Interpreter*.
2. Adam, A. S. (2024, September 21). Toward fiscal stability and economic resilience: Overcoming misaligned incentives in the Maldives' energy sector. *Maldives Policy Think Tank*.
3. Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology. (2024, November 7). Paving the way for a just energy transition in Maldives: Road map for the energy sector 2024–2033.
4. Liu, Z. Z. (2022). What the China-Solomon Islands pact means for the U.S. and South Pacific. *Council on Foreign Relations*.
5. Zama, N., Suzuki, M., & Shazly, A. (2023). Social acceptance and social, economic, and environmental impact of renewable energy: A case study from Hanimaadhoo Island, Maldives. *The Maldives National Journal of Research*, 11(Special Issue: Theveli 2023), 38–55.

Framing Small States' Food Security and Fisheries Protection – A Regional Strategy for Maldives

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed & Dr Nadhiya Abdulla
Analysis

Published in MSO, 7 August 2025

Introduction

Food security remains underrepresented in national security discourse in Maldives. Despite increasing scholarly and development studies, small states often lack the policy capacity to integrate food insecurity into strategic planning, weakening disaster preparedness and resilience efforts.

Recognising the profound implications of food insecurity is crucial for small states facing acute climate threats. As rising seas and shifting ecosystems imperil both land and marine resources, a nuanced understanding that enables targeted, resilient policies that address vulnerability, safeguard livelihoods, and foster adaptive capacity amid escalating environmental and economic uncertainties is needed.

As a maritime state composed of 1,200 islands and 21 atolls, Maldives relies heavily on the ocean for its food systems and economic stability. According to FAO's four-pillar framework, availability, access, utilisation, and stability Maldives faces acute vulnerabilities in availability and stability given that over 90 per cent of staple foods (rice, flour, and sugar) are imported, and local protein sources are almost entirely marine based making the country highly vulnerable to external shocks and disruptions in the supply chain.¹ While tourism dominates the economy, fisheries remain vital for rural livelihoods and national food security, especially outside Malé.² The National Fisheries and Agricultural Policy (2019–2029) emphasises the need to reduce dependency on imports by enhancing local fish availability and post-harvest infrastructure.

Regional cooperation is essential to this effort, enabling shared surveillance, trade resilience, and climate adaptation. For Maldives, securing local marine resources is not only a matter of economic diversification but a cornerstone of national resilience in the face of climate change and geopolitical uncertainty.

Framing Small States via Climate-Induced Food Insecurity

In Tuvalu, projections show a 23.4 per cent reduction in purse-seine catch under high emissions scenarios, risking a 12.6 per cent drop in government revenue.³ Similarly, Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015 destroyed 60 per cent of pulaka pits, disrupting traditional food systems and exacerbating displacement and land competition.

Displacement in Tuvalu – driven by sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and frequent flooding – has profound implications for food security and regional stability. For example, the abandonment of pulaka pits and the transformation of land use in Funafuti reflect a breakdown in traditional agricultural practices and ecological knowledge, forcing communities to relocate inland or migrate inter-island and disrupting subsistence farming and livestock activities, which are already constrained by poor soil fertility and saltwater intrusion. Therefore, prioritising climate-resilient agriculture, reviving traditional food-acquiring skills, and securing

climate finance for adaptive infrastructure are essential to stabilising communities and preventing cascading risks across the region.

Conflict-food security nexus suggests that resource scarcity, institutional fragility, and displacement are precursors to unrest.⁴ In small states, rising sea levels, coral bleaching, and declining fish stocks threaten coastal livelihoods and food access.⁵ While dependence on imports increases the risks of insecurity, internal food systems – i.e., for Maldives, fish account for a significant percentage of community nutrition – have been constantly threatened by human-induced activities, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign vessels. During 2016–2017, over 400 vessels were caught in Maldives' waters fishing illegally.

These challenges demand considering a broader aspect of security – one that includes ecological, human, and food system dimensions – and must include a regional approach to address capacity issues in small states. Dependence on regional cooperation must consider frameworks, like the Pacific Islands' 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, to strategically navigate small states' interests, especially the climate-based security narrative, supporting data sharing for regional efforts.

Securing Food Insecurity in Maldives – a Regional Strategy

Locally, Maldives' food insecurity is marine-based. According to Nadhiya Abdulla, Natalia Vasylieva, and Iryna Volovyk, during 2020–2024, over 98 per cent of the national fish catch comprises skipjack and yellowfin tuna – species vulnerable to warming seas and seasonal migration.⁶ While export volumes rise, domestic fish consumption is declining by 3.03 thousand tons annually, reducing protein intake by 3.3 grams per capita per day. Poorer atolls such as Haa Dhaalu, Alif Alif, and Vaavu face unstable catches and lack post-harvest infrastructure, deepening nutritional gaps. Maldives risks losing foreign exchange if tuna migrate eastward under climate stress along with nutritional deficits in rural islands such as Haa Dhaalu, Alif Alif, and Vaavu, posing a dual vulnerability in terms of security.

Securing maritime resources requires a two-pronged strategy. First, environmental conservation: For example, protecting the coral reefs, which span 4,500 km² and host over 1,100 fish species, protects against coastal hazards and underpins fisheries and tourism, contributing nearly 50 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is vital. Second, security operations: the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard plays a critical role in deterring illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which undermines national sovereignty, threatens local fishers and depletes fish stocks.

Both elements of this strategy hinge on robust regional cooperation. While reliance on food imports is part of a broader regional approach – exemplified by Maldives’ longstanding trade of food-importing ties with India – true resilience can only be built by strengthening local capacities. For example, development aid has significantly supported marine conservation initiatives, while defence collaborations with India and Sri Lanka, enhancing surveillance and response to IUU fishing, may not complete data collaboration efforts.

Regional Mechanisms and Collective Security

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Southwest Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC) can bolster Maldives’ marine conservation by promoting coordinated governance, technical assistance, and shared surveillance systems. IORA and SWIOFC often rely on member state contributions and external research partnerships to fill these data gaps.

IORA and SWIOFC significantly enhance Indo-Pacific maritime security by promoting legal harmonisation, regional dialogue, and coordinated surveillance. IORA’s *Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security (WGMSS)* facilitates practical cooperation among member states – including Maldives – through shared frameworks and

capacity-building initiatives aimed at addressing transboundary maritime threats such as IUU fishing, piracy, and trafficking. SWIOFC supports sustainable fisheries governance and evidence-based management across its member states, including Maldives, through regional coordination and data-driven policy advice.

Surveillance and monitoring of IUU fishing are strengthened through real-time data sharing. For example, *Trygg Mat Tracking (TMT)* collaborates with IORA and other regional bodies to analyse AIS and satellite data, identifying suspicious vessel patterns and ownership structures. TMT’s tools—such as the Combined IUU Vessel List and Vessel Viewer—enable enforcement agencies to track vessel movements and assess risk profiles.

Australia’s *Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA)* uses this intelligence to guide regional patrols and targeted enforcement actions, working closely with *Maritime Border Command (MBC)*, a multi-agency taskforce that coordinates aerial and surface surveillance across Australia’s maritime domain.⁷

Meanwhile, the *U.S. Coast Guard’s Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Center of Expertise (USCG-IUUF COE)*, based in Hawaii, serves as the international engagement arm for counter-IUU efforts in the Indo-Pacific. It provides partner nations with access to global databases, incident reports, and best practices, supporting bilateral law enforcement agreements and capacity-building initiatives.

Collectively, Maldives can enhance its maritime domain awareness, strengthen food security by deterring IUU fishing through legal harmonisation, surveillance coordination, and data sharing. As summarised in Table 1, various regional and international mechanisms provide technical, operational, and diplomatic support that directly bolster Maldives’ capacity to combat IUU fishing.

Table 1: Various Regional and International Mechanisms

Organisations/ Mechanisms	Support Activities for IUU Monitoring	Maldives' Gains
Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)	Facilitates regional dialogue and legal harmonisation. Promotes data sharing and maritime cooperation.	Strengthened diplomatic leverage in regional forums. Improved legal frameworks.
SW Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC)	Supports fisheries governance and MCS training. Coordinates regional fisheries data and assessments.	Enhanced technical capacity in fisheries management. Access to regional data.
Trygg Mat Tracking (TMT)	Provides AIS-based vessel tracking and risk analysis. Detects suspicious patterns and IUU hotspots.	Real-time surveillance capabilities. Early warning for illegal vessel activity.
Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA)	Offers technical assistance and patrol coordination. Mentors Coast Guard personnel in MCS operations.	Operational upskilling of the Coast Guard. Strengthened bilateral security ties.
U.S. Coast Guard IUU Fishing Center of Expertise	Enhances Indo-Pacific maritime coordination. Supplies operational tools and strategic frameworks.	Integration into Indo-Pacific security architecture. Access to strategic tools.

Conclusion

Maldives' path to food security and national resilience lies not in isolation, but in strategic integration of local marine resource management, regional partnerships, and adaptive governance. As a small maritime state, its resilience depends on the health of its ocean and the strength of its cooperation to support the capacity to secure food systems. High dependency on imports and climate-sensitive fisheries exposes Maldives to external

shocks and nutritional gaps, which is not alone an economic concern but also a national security priority. Integrating food security into a broader security framework will enable Maldives to safeguard the livelihoods and attain stability and adaptability in the escalating environmental and geopolitical uncertainties.

Authors

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The

Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

Dr Nadhiya Abdulla is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Research Development Department at The Maldives National University. A former educator and curriculum developer, she holds a PhD in Management from Dnipro State Agrarian and Economic University, Ukraine, with a research focus on sustainable farming systems in the Maldives. Her work spans agriculture, food security, and development policy.

-
1. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2023). Maldives and FAO: Achievements and success stories.
 2. Maldivian Government. (2019). *National Fisheries and Agricultural Policy 2019–2029*.
 3. SPREP. (2024). Risks to food security in Tuvalu discussed during Tuvalu National Adaptation Plan stakeholder workshop.
 4. Lin, T. K., et al. (2022). Pathways to food insecurity in the context of conflict: The case of the occupied Palestinian territory. *Conflict and Health*, 16(1), 38.
 5. Naseem, H. (2025). Exploring climate change impacts on food security in Maldives. *SDG Knowledge Hub*.
 6. Abdulla, N., et al. (2024). Fisheries management for food security in the Maldives. *Agricultural and Resource Economics: International Scientific E-Journal*, 10(3), 34–55
 7. Australian Fisheries Management Authority. (n.d.). Enforcement operations.
-

Defence Cooperation Forges Stronger Regional Alliances – Small States’ Strategy

By Col Amanulla Ahmed Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 23 July 2025

Introduction

Regional stability and security are integral to strengthening foreign partnerships and interoperability. Defence cooperation transcends mere transactions of hardware and routine drills – i.e., defence cooperation acts as a linchpin for aligning shared interests, collective vision, and enduring trust between states.

For example, India-Maldives defence ties represent aspects of small states’ foreign partnerships and interoperability, informing the strengthening of alliances across the Indian Ocean region (IOR) – similar effects are observed through partnerships with like-minded countries like Australia.

Defence engagements have deterred external pressures, alleviated strategic anxieties, and encouraged goodwill across borders. For example, since the 1990s, the trilateral exercises among India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka have forged maritime capabilities to advance small states’ role in ensuring regional security.

Mutuality with small states via partnerships

Maldives has a minimal role in the realist framing of regional partnerships. However, India has been a steadfast defence partner to Maldives since 1988, embracing a flexible and responsive approach to train and equip their mutual needs. Defence diplomacy has been key to this.

Defence diplomacy is more than mere signing of agreements and building dialogue; it underpins military-to-military engagements that allow for building mutual capability through shared practices.

For example, the 2016 Comprehensive Action Plan for Defence formalises improved bilateral defence engagements.¹ The Defence Cooperation Dialogue (DCD), Joint Staff Talks (JST), and Sector-Specific Training & Capacity Building provide the foundation

to military-to-military exercises and operations. Spanning mutual logistics, training, information awareness, maritime security, and crisis response operations and exercises can allow Maldives to navigate its common interests with India to ensure a stable regional order.

Case 1: Building Interoperability and Understanding

Launched in 2009, Exercise Ekuverin (“Friends” in Dhivehi) focuses on joint counter-insurgency and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) capabilities. Conducted alternately in Maldives and India (Uttarakhand in 2023), it reinforces social and operational bonds. Exercise Ekatha centred on naval and maritime security cooperation between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). It supported other exercises by integrating both service branches and enhancing sea-based operational coherence.

Trilateral Exercise DOSTI – originally launched in 1991 and expanded to include Sri Lanka in 2012 – has enhanced military-to-military engagements among the coast guards of India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. The 16th edition occurred in February 2024, near Malé, with Bangladesh as an observer.

These regular and well-structured exercises build trust, tactically align forces, and deepen regional solidarity. They also serve as tangible demonstrations of a predictable, and rules-based order in the IOR.

In 2006, Maldives received the Trinkat-class patrol vessel CGS Huravee from India.² The ship acquired multiple refits – in 2018 (Visakhapatnam), 2021, and a major overhaul in Mumbai from November 2024 to April 2025 – before returning to its operations in Maldives in April 2025. The consistent maintenance support underscores India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy and the vision of – Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across the Region – by ensuring Maldivian patrol capabilities remain uninterrupted.

Extending partnerships:

Maldives’ maritime capacity steps up with Türkiye’s Doğan-class Fast Attack Craft TCG Volkan (P343) to

improve the oceanic island country’s defence capabilities. Australia followed in June 2025 by announcing the donation of a Guardian-class patrol vessel.

In addition to the sophisticated and autonomous operational capability of maritime security and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), Maldives have inducted Turkish-built Bayraktar TB2 drones into service.

The Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercises with partner nations to foster maritime domain awareness in the IOR, collectively enabling larger domestic capabilities for vessel maintenance and harbour operations such as the Ekatha Harbour and Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) projects.³

The integration of sea and air assets enhances its interoperability with regional security actors, and these would strengthen Maldives’ long-term sovereign capacity to maintain autonomy and control in its maritime environment.

Case 2: Maritime Domain Awareness

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) – i.e., monitoring events at sea that affect security, economy, environment, and safety of a nation – is central to regional maritime governance.

For example, equipped with patrol vessels, Dornier aircraft, Dhruv helicopters, and air-surveillance assets like the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) inducted to MNDF can advance surveillance of its EEZ, conduct search-and-rescue (SAR), medical evacuations (MEDEVAC), and enforce maritime law – crucial in a country where 99 per cent of national territory is water.

Maldives, an archipelagic nation, is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, approximately 230 nautical miles southwest of the Indian peninsula. This geographic positioning grants Maldives a substantial Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spanning an estimated 923,322km². Its waters are traversed by critical international shipping lanes, including the Eight Degree Channel, Equatorial Channel, 1½ Degree Channel, and Kaashidhoo Channel, underscoring the nation’s pivotal role in global maritime trade and connectivity.

Further, Maldives Civil Aviation Authority aligns with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) standards, coordinating aerial surveillance. Integrating civil and military air data with radar systems creates a holistic surveillance overview, advancing Maldives' contribution to the regional fusion networks and improving transparency and response capabilities to govern its maritime security.

The DOSTI trilateral exercise sits alongside forums like the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). Launched in 2011 and rebranded in 2022, the CSC addresses five pillars: maritime safety, counter-terrorism, transnational crime, cyber-security, and humanitarian response. This mini-lateral cushion reinforces a regional security architecture, expanding Maldives' role.

Through its radar data and liaison officers at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), Maldives enriches a shared maritime picture of the Western Indian Ocean, bolstering early detection and response against IUU fishing, piracy, trafficking, and other maritime threats. This collaborative MDA framework delivers tangible benefits for all democratic littoral nations.⁴

Case 3: Humanitarian Assistance, Disaster Relief, and Soft Power

Maldives, an archipelagic nation of 1,192 coral islands, frequently confronts natural calamities, with MNDF at the forefront of humanitarian response. During the 2004 Tsunami, it led large-scale rescue and relief operations, including setting up coordination centres and shelters across affected islands.

In 2014, following the disruption of Malé's water infrastructure, MNDF coordinated India's "Operation Neer," which delivered over 1,000 tonnes of fresh water via sea and air assets.⁵ Amid the 2020 pandemic, MNDF managed logistics and distribution for India's "Operation Sanjeevani," which airlifted approximately 6.2 tonnes of essential medical supplies to Maldives.⁶

Response capability is heightened through bilateral HADR drills, joint sea-rider and pollution-control exercises, MEDEVAC and med-team transfers –

where approximately 630 operations have occurred since 2019.

This potent mix of "hard" and "soft" security evolves defence cooperation into multidimensional goodwill.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Diplomacy and regional cooperation, Maldives extends its cooperation with all partners who share mutual interests to maintain harmonious relationships and deepen interoperability. Maldives aims to further enhance its national force's technical capabilities to effectively undertake security operations, and advance and maintain maritime platforms, ensuring mission readiness in maritime security governance.

MDA can link civilian agencies, national coast guards, airlines, shipping industries, fisheries, the environment, and policing. A whole-of-society approach will ensure maritime governance is comprehensive, beyond just military networks.

A unified regional MDA grid – from Maldives to East Africa to Southeast Asia, joint capacity-building in autonomous systems – artificial intelligence, cyber defence, quantum communications and joint investment in coastal surveillance infrastructure, remote-sensing satellites, and drones.

Conclusion

Defence cooperation fosters trust, shared identity, resilience, and regional leadership. Through training, exercises, hardware sharing, maritime fusion, and humanitarian engagement, partner nations are weaving a tapestry of security that benefits littoral small states, deters external coercion, and promotes a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. More than defence, it is strategic diplomacy with substance, a promise for collective security and building resilience where small states play a larger role.

Author

Col Amanulla Ahmed Rasheed is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). He has two postgraduate degrees, in Management from Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka and Art and Science in Warfare from the National Defence

University, Pakistan. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policy and position.

1. Government of India. (2025). India-Maldives bilateral relations
2. Ahmed, S. N. (2023). Enriching the defence contours of India-Maldives relations. *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*
3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2024). India and Maldives: A vision for comprehensive economic and maritime security partnership
4. Iyer, G. (2020). Sense for sensibility: Maritime domain awareness through the information fusion centre – Indian Ocean Region. *Observer Research Foundation*
5. Bosley, D. (2014). Water distribution to stop as Malé water crisis nears end. *Maldives Independent*
6. Siddiqui, H. (2020). Operation Sanjeevani: IAF airlifts medical and hospital consumables for the Maldives. *Financial Express*

Maldives – A Rising Transit Hub in Maritime Drug Trafficking, Navigating Security

By Lt Col Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 20 July 2025

Introduction

The geographic position makes Maldives an increasingly crucial transit hub for maritime drug trafficking, shaping national and regional security priorities.

Maldives sits between two of the world's most notorious drug-producing regions: the Makran coast, which forms part of the Golden Crescent (comprising Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan), and Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, which includes parts of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, hence making its waters a favoured route for drug trafficking activities.

The vastness of the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) poses significant challenges for effective patrolling and monitoring. These difficulties are compounded by limited access to real-time intelligence and the lack of advanced surveillance technologies.

Therefore, addressing drug-related crime in Maldives would require navigating national security priorities with regional partners through defence diplomacy and military-to-military cooperation.

Framing Small States' Security

In the 2018 Boe Declaration, the Pacific Islands, along with Australia, declared that security is more than military-based exercises, by framing climate change as the single greatest threat to the sustainability and national and regional security.

The Pacific Islands, or Maldives for that matter, have limited resources to address inundation caused by sea level rise.

This broader understanding of security allows small states to tap into regional mechanisms – whether through organisations or bilateral partnerships – to strengthen their national capacity to address issues of sustainability and security. Global adaptation and mitigation programmes, for example, reflect a shared recognition of such a challenge by the international community to shape aid policies in small states' favour.

With such limitations, for small states, the lack of resources can translate into a desire to form strategic partnerships with external security actors.

Rising Challenges – Scattered Information

On 23 November 2024, the Sri Lankan fishing trawler "Ashen Putha" was apprehended by the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard, with 344 kg of crystal methamphetamine and 124 kg of cocaine.²

A week before Ashen Putha was captured, the Coast Guard intercepted a Sri Lankan fishing trawler, "MASHI BABA", 10 nautical miles northeast of Haa Alifu Kelaa. The vessel was apprehended and subsequently handed over to the Maldives Police Service (MPS). The crew members of MASHI BABA were inexperienced in fishing activities.

During the investigation of MASHI BABA case, in November 2024, the MNDF Coast Guard received key intelligence inputs about another Sri Lankan fishing vessel, Ashen Putha, located to the northwest of Haa Alif Makunudhoo within the Maldives' territorial waters. Upon boarding this vessel, the crew initially claimed to be in distress and requested medical assistance.

After a thorough search was conducted, the Coast Guard discovered suspected drugs aboard the vessel, which was then handed over to the police for further action and investigation.

It was suspected that the fishing vessel MASHI BABA was positioned at the transit hub, in Maldives to receive drugs from Ashen Putha to be transported to Sri Lanka. Furthermore, they may have used Maldivian waters to evade detection by Sri Lankan authorities, especially considering the several other drug busts that were being carried out by the Sri Lankan Navy earlier the same month.

The drugs were not intended for distribution or consumption within Maldives – although they may potentially create room for local engagements. The drugs were rather destined for a different, possibly larger regional market in South Asia or Southeast Asia. Maldivian waters were a convenient and strategic transit route due to the country's vast maritime area. The perpetrators were probably observing the limitations of surveillance capabilities in Maldives, enabling them to operate undetected.

Moving Beyond the Challenges: The Path Ahead

The transnational nature of drug trafficking requires regional and international efforts to combat it. Maldives cannot address the issue alone, given the scale and sophistication of modern criminal operations at sea.

Criminal networks utilise highly advanced smuggling tactics, including the deployment of floating drug packages equipped with VHF (Very High Frequency) beacons – i.e., use of advanced technologies by criminal groups is on the rise. These packages can be discreetly dropped in international or territorial waters and later retrieved by accomplices using the beacon signals, making interception by local authorities considerably difficult. This allows traffickers to reduce the risk of detection and arrest

while enabling coordination across vast maritime distances.

The seagoing vessels and their crew members often come from diverse nationalities, creating legal and jurisdictional ambiguities. For example, a ship flying one's flag, with a multinational crew, carrying drugs intended for another country, raises complex legal questions that a single state may not have the institutional frameworks to address its criminal activity alone.

Mere bilateral or regional discussions are not enough. There must be real-time intelligence sharing among countries within the region and even globally. This may be considered in the following areas of cooperation.

Legal cooperation:

In building capabilities, Maldives can strengthen the pool of regional legal experts in Public International Maritime Law, filling potential gaps in information and legal processes between jurisdictions to best curb threats originating abroad and serving its national interests.

Maritime surveillance cooperation:

Rapid communication and coordinated maritime surveillance can lead to quicker interdiction of suspicious vessels and more effective prosecution. Maldives requires the support of larger, more resourceful nations in the region or even broader international coalitions – the DOSTI-trilateral exercise between Maldives, India, and Sri Lanka is notable.

This assistance can provide modern equipment and technology, maritime situational awareness tools, training, and legal expertise to fill the existing gaps that traffickers tend to exploit.

The Maldives is venturing into newer domains, such as space, to expand its capacities, as outlined in plans to develop a satellite-based monitoring system.

Minister of Defence Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon confirms that the Government's effort in the Maldives Space Research Organisation (MSRO) and collaboration with NASA-affiliated experts.³ Establishing a low-Earth orbit (LEO)

satellite would significantly enhance the country's ability to monitor its extensive maritime territory. Developing a geosynchronous orbit satellite (GEO) should be the next defined goal for Maldives as well.

Defence diplomacy:

With improved access to real-time intelligence, Maldives can consider deploying liaison officers to key regional maritime coordination centres such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and other regional fusion centres across the Indo-Pacific, promoting regional defence diplomacy as a tool of national security.

Conclusion

Without shared responsibility, the sea will continue to be a safe haven for smugglers, threatening both Maldives' national security and regional stability. Tackling threats at sea requires a unified, well-defined and coordinated effort, combining the best practices of nations with an informed focus on proactive intelligence sharing, legal cooperation, and sustained technological advancement.

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). He has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policy and position.

-
1. Carter, G., & Rasheed, A. A. (2023). Samoa and the Alliance of Small Island States show climate security is also about loss and damage. *The Interpreter*.
 2. Newswire. (2024). Sri Lankan trawler "Ashen Putha" detained in Maldives with over 450 kg drugs.
 3. (2024). Defence minister announces efforts to monitor Maldivian waters via satellite.
-

Australia–Bangladesh–Maldives Interoperability at Sea: A Strategic Web of Relationships

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed &
Professor Lailufar Yasmin

Analysis

Published in MSO, 1 July 2025

Introduction

The 2023 *Defence Strategic Review* and 2024 *National Defence Strategy* set a comprehensive agenda for reforming Australia's defence posture and structure, including expanding its web of relationships with Bangladesh and Maldives. For Australia, its strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific region take into account multi-faceted actors, identifying key subregions within. It, therefore, did not go unnoticed that Bangladesh and Maldives, owing to their strategic locations in the Bay of Bengal and the 8-Degree Channel, respectively, serve as maritime epicentres in the Indian Ocean.

With over 90 per cent of Bangladesh's trade conducted via sea, its ports and offshore resources are vital for regional stability. Maldives' security is crucial for safeguarding approximately 40 per cent of global cargo and oil shipments, and more than 50 per cent of the world's food supply that transits through key Indian Ocean routes, including the 8-Degree Channel.

Australia has categorically recognised and supported the strategic agency of Bangladesh and Maldives in enhancing maritime security capabilities. In efforts to strengthen force posture in the northeastern Indian Ocean, Australia is leveraging its interoperability with these littoral states through cooperation in intelligence, surveillance, and the sharing of technology and equipment.

Aspects of Interoperability and Small States

Interoperability in defence and security refers to the ability of different military forces to work together effectively. Australia's regular joint military exercises with the United States, such as Talisman Sabre, demonstrate the practical benefits of

interoperability, improving readiness and operational cohesion.¹ For Australia, interoperability is crucial for enhancing regional security and addressing shared challenges in the Indian Ocean.

In theory, emphasis on John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, interoperability can help great powers maximise their power by leveraging smaller states' resources to counterbalance potential threats and gain regional dominance. Big and small states must ensure that communication systems, weapons, and other technologies are compatible, and common protocols and procedures support joint missions. Interoperability can help great power achieve its regional security objectives. However, there is a sense of small states' agency in this collaborative effort.

Australia's military aid has helped the Indo-Pacific small states to advance their technologies and information systems, building capabilities to minimise the risk arising from their territories and address them collectively as their threats traverse across national and regional waters.

For example, Australia's defence cooperation with Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been extensive and multifaceted, involving various initiatives and joint operations. The Guardian-class patrol boats delivered to PNG by the Australian Government, under the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP), will raise PNG's 'ability to protect its territorial waters and tackle shared maritime security challenges' like Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.²

In the Indian Ocean, Australia's collaboration with smaller nations like Bangladesh and Maldives, can further enhance its defence outreach, uplifting its deterrence by denying threats arising from the northern and eastern Indian Ocean territories. Similarly, Australia's active engagements in local capacity-building will create a win-win situation for Bangladesh and Maldives.

Australian-Bangladesh Strategic Relationship at Sea

Australia-Bangladesh maritime security cooperation has emerged as a key pillar in the evolving bilateral relationship. In the May 2024 Ministerial Dialogue in

Dhaka, both countries reaffirmed their commitment to a peaceful, stable, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, acknowledging the strategic importance of the northeastern Indian Ocean and expressing a shared interest in addressing maritime security threats.³

Historically, Australia's military visits to Bangladesh were rare. However, the growing commitment to engage in the maritime security domain has become pivotal in determining mutual benefits between the two countries. For one thing, capabilities for maritime domain awareness (MDA) in Bangladesh are a step towards building interoperability capabilities with Australia.

Bangladesh can cover critical areas such as intelligence and diplomacy – the country already authors a climate security narrative to influence security thinking in small states' engagements.

Australia is working actively in developing Bangladesh's maritime domain awareness and streamlining Bangladesh's maritime policies with a view to enhancing a rapid response in the maritime sector.

Under the changing realities of Bangladesh's domestic politics, it plans to cultivate stronger maritime ties to protect its maritime interests in its vicinity. As a part of this, Australia has increased its collaborations between the Bangladesh Coast Guard and the Australian Border Force. The idea that spurred it was to enhance civil-maritime cooperation to protect Bangladesh's maritime interests. Under the collaboration, Bangladesh will receive technical assistance to strengthen its maritime surveillance, which will include drones. Gradually, the relationship will expand in the areas of joint training and strategic coordination, exchange of real-time information, and working together to respond to the challenges of maritime organised criminal activities.

Diplomatically, Bangladesh's active participation in multilateral forums like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) can help shape Bangladesh's regional narrative in driving Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy.

The ability to support intelligence and diplomatic efforts ensures that Bangladesh can effectively

support Australia's maritime security objectives in the Indian Ocean.

Australian-Maldives Strategic Relationship at Sea

Australia's maritime cooperation with Maldives has been pivotal in enhancing regional security, fostering mutual gains.

Australia's recent announcement to gift a Guardian-class patrol boat in 2025 to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) marks a significant milestone in this partnership. This patrol boat is designed for a range of operations, including surveillance, search and rescue, fisheries protection, and interdiction missions.

The addition of this vessel will significantly bolster Maldives' maritime security capabilities, allowing for a more persistent presence in its vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to deter, detect, and disrupt illegal maritime activities.

Furthermore, in 2025, Australia also announced the gifting of hydrographic equipment to Maldives, enhancing its capability to map the ocean floor and ensure maritime safety, and its knowledge base of territorial waters.

Recent donations and collaboration, including defence dialogues and the Indo-Pacific Endeavour exercise, can reinforce Australia's strategic policy of supporting small states in the Indian Ocean, emphasising collective security through interoperability between the two maritime forces, allowing one another to benefit from areas of expertise and strengths.⁴

Conclusion

Australia is well-positioned to serve as a strategic bridge between Maldives and Bangladesh, facilitating joint maritime operations and intelligence sharing. As small states situated at the crossroads of critical sea lanes, Bangladesh and Maldives will be pivotal in maintaining regional security. Their maritime security capabilities will contribute to complement and bolster regional security objectives through strengthened intelligence cooperation and diplomatic engagement. Australia's maritime security engagements are pursued with the interest of

engaging with an objective where parties involved have opportunities to gain. The complementarity in maritime relationships between Australia on the one hand and its partners on the other provides positive-sum incentives. The *Maritime Century* is here to stay, which will test countries' readiness to meet the new challenges. Australia stands as one of the key Indian Ocean countries that can offer cutting-edge technology and capacity building from within the region, thus making these contextual and relevant for Bangladesh and Maldives.

Authors

Dr Lailufar Yasmin is Professor and former Head of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. She can be reached at lyasmin@du.ac.bd.

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

-
1. Australian Army. (2025). Exercise Talisman Sabre.
 2. Australian Government. (2023). Fourth Guardian-class patrol boat delivered to Papua New Guinea.
 3. Minister of Foreign Affairs. (2024). Bangladesh-Australia Ministerial Dialogue, Dhaka.
 4. MNDF. (2024). Australia and Maldives hold first defence policy talks to strengthen cooperation.
-

Tailoring Maritime Security in Maldives: Beyond Dependency

By LtCol Ahmed Jameel

Analysis

Published in MSO, 18 June 2025

Introduction

Maldives faces multifaceted challenges in ensuring its defence, such as limited resources, manpower, and high infrastructure management costs. It is

essential to have a defence force tailored to Maldives' unique needs. With about 99 per cent of its ocean territory, Maldives can be viewed as a 'big ocean state'.¹ With no land borders shared with other countries, the appropriate structure for its defence must consider its unique history, geographic landscape, and the nature of specific maritime threats it faces.

Historical events explain how security threats and invasions have shaped Maldives' approach to national defence. For example, the invasion of Maldives by the Portuguese on 19 May 1558 must be highlighted. There was no formal acknowledgement by the Portuguese Government of invading Maldives. Rather, as far as the local narratives go, the country was invaded by a piratical force, assassinating the ruler and ruling the country for fifteen years. The Portuguese were defeated by a local named Mohamed Thakurufaanu, a resident from the northern island of Utheemu. He had a tactical mind, formed a militant group, built a large local-style boat named 'Kalhuohfummi', sailed to and attacked Malé with his trusted locals, and defeated Portuguese belligerents, taking back Maldives' independence.

This type of locally induced amphibious raid by the Kalhuohfummi reflects the culture and identity of a naval seamanship inherent in Maldives.

Small State Dependency and Strategic Cooperation

Maldives depends on aid partners to support its development and security, and has fostered development and strategic partnerships with India, Australia, China, and the United States. In an era of geopolitical competition among major powers, Maldives has adopted a strategic approach to safeguard its interests and prevent foreign aid partners from exerting undue influence over its domestic affairs.

Historically, Maldives was a British protectorate from 1887 to 1965. The then ruler – i.e., the ruler was the King – negotiated a protection agreement with the British colonial Governor based in Sri Lanka, to protect this island nation against potential pirates and invaders at sea. This agreement did not come without challenges.

For example, the control over Maldives enabled the British, during World War Two (WWII), to install a Royal Air Force (RAF) base on the southernmost atoll, Addu Atoll.² The base was utilised for the British military's logistical operations and the RAF's refuelling purposes.

During their occupation, the British employed divide-and-rule strategies, turning Maldivian communities against the Malé government.

However, under the protection agreement, the Malé government maintained a defined level of autonomy over domestic political affairs – i.e., primarily, the British controlled foreign and security policies. This political autonomy enabled the then-ruler, former president Ibrahim Nasir (1957-65) – by this time, the country had turned to a republic-type political system – to act locally and dismantle the separatist southerners' uprising.

The ripples of such British unsuccessful attempts locally aided in fuelling an independence campaign run by former President Nasir – Maldives began its journey as an independent modern nation state' on 26th July 1965.³

The idea of a necessary balance between foreign dependency and influence has shaped Maldives' defence and security thinking, policy and strategy in the coming decades.

Defence Cooperation and Diplomacy

In November 1988, a group of foreign terrorist belligerent attacked Maldives, inflicting harm on local and military lives and damaging infrastructure. The group was part of a militant Tamil faction from Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), with the involvement of a group of locals opposing and planning to overthrow the then Government led by former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

This annexationist bid was foiled by the Maldives armed forces, with the assistance of the Indian military. The tactical operation named Operation CACTUS, launched by India, specifically the Indian Navy, aided Maldives in quickly restoring order.⁴

Today, pirates from Somalia, apart from ongoing illegal vessels originating from the waters of Sri

Lanka or India, have had their occasions of reaching, entering and crossing Maldives' ocean territory, raising ever-growing concerns and the need for national and regional measures to curb them.

The most effective strategy is to neutralise threats before they reach Maldives' national territorial borders. Achieving this requires the country to significantly enhance its intelligence capabilities and build its maritime, land, and air forces.

The Maldivian Government's ongoing efforts to enhance collaboration with regional partners and work closely with like-minded foreign partners will support strengthening intelligence sharing, gathering and analysis, to ensure potential threats are detected and addressed well in advance. A well-defined intelligence service would require cooperative and collaborative mechanisms at the regional level. The integration of modern technology is essential.

Planning Strategic Maritime Defence Objectives

Maldives' three-tiered joint defence system, comprising air, maritime and land forces, would be crucial.

Maritime Force: The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard functions both as a law enforcement body and a traditional maritime security and defence force. One of its primary obstacles is the scarcity of resources and personnel, especially given the vast sea it has to manage to keep secure – overseeing an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 859,000 sq km remains a challenge.

The Coast Guard handles a broad range of duties, including maritime pollution response, maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), enforcement of maritime laws, and combating transnational maritime crimes. It also manages maritime ambulance services, a crucial role given the country's geographical makeup.

Capacity building is important, but the Coast Guard must obtain more Multi-Role Supply Ships (MRSS) for mass rescue operations and as a potential hospital ship to mitigate disasters and better manage diverse contingencies.⁵

Land Force: A land force ensures sovereignty and territorial integrity remain intact under all conditions. The presence of a land force is essential to bind the nation as an entity, as land forces are more visible to the people of a nation and traditionally secure the land borders of the country. The presence of a land force, in synergy with maritime operations, is imperative – the amphibious operations are highlighted.

Air Force: The Air Force unit plays a pivotal role in national security by conducting Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations across the Maldives' vast maritime territory. These operations are crucial for the planning and execution of military and security operations, considering Maldives' expansive geography and the multifaceted responsibilities of MNDF, including constabulary and humanitarian roles.

These forces can act from the ground up and navigate regional efforts with a dedicated intelligence service, providing timely and actionable inputs, enabling pre-emptive measures to neutralise threats.

In Maldives, community engagement and partnerships have supported the maritime domain safekeeping efforts. The local fishing community has been an informal set of eyes and ears, supporting efforts of security agencies to keep a watch on the Maldivian waters against illegal or suspicious vessels. The ongoing collaborations, such as the DOSTI trilateral maritime exercises with India and Sri Lanka, will support sharing data with Maldives and build interoperability as a best practice to maintain regional waters safe.

Maldives should aim to enhance its air defence capabilities and reduce dependence on external support – the introduction of tactical drones can bolster the existing maritime surveillance capabilities. As it seeks aid for self-reliance, Maldives seeks to expand collaborations with foreign partners with mutual interests.

Conclusion

The vast sea presents opportunities for developing security measures to keep critical maritime infrastructure safe. Maritime capability building should prioritise aerial assets first, then surface

capabilities, and finally land forces to ensure a balanced defence force. The Maldivian Government's ongoing efforts to strengthen defence capabilities and build stronger forces come hand in hand with enhanced regional cooperation.

Author

Lt Col Ahmed Jameel is a serving officer in the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). He has a postgraduate degree in International Relations from Salve Regina University, USA. The author acknowledges that statements, opinions and arguments made are of his own and do not reflect the Maldivian Government's policy and position.

-
1. The Commonwealth. (2024). SIDS4 side event: Closing the blue funding gap – Mobilising a blue innovation and impact fund for big ocean states.
 2. The National. (2023). How Maldives gained independence from the British empire
 3. Raajje.MV. (2021). Independence Day: A look back at the beginning of establishment of diplomatic relations.
 4. Sharma, R. (2024). Operation Cactus: When India deployed all three forces to protect Maldives. *India Today*.
 5. Banerji, A. (2023). Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief: New frontier for China-India contestation? *The Diplomat*.
-

Maritime Synergy in the Indo-Pacific: Australia's Strategic Patrol Boat Gift to Maldives

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed

Analysis

Published in MSO, 3 June 2025

Introduction

As a small island state situated at the crossroads of vital sea lanes, Maldives holds strategic leverage in shaping the governance of regional security strategy.

The relationship between Australia and Maldives stands as a testament to the evolving regional strategic engagements, safeguarding regional

stability and promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The recent announcement by Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Hon. Richard Marles MP, during his official visit to the Maldives on 2 June 2025, regarding the Australian Government's pledge to gift a steel-hulled Guardian-class Patrol Boat – designed and constructed by Austal Australia – to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), marks a significant milestone in the deepening of defence cooperation and strengthening bilateral relations between Australia and Maldives.

Australia's initiative will not only augment Maldives' maritime security capabilities but will also reinforce Australia's strategic policy of supporting small states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, emphasising its priorities of building collective security through multilateral collaboration and engagement with the Indian Ocean states.

Strategic Significance of the Patrol Boat

The Guardian-class Patrol Boat, launched as part of Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP), a programme that builds on the original Pacific Patrol Boat Program, is a versatile vessel designed for a range of maritime operations including surveillance, search and rescue, fisheries protection, and interdiction missions.¹

Built with a 22 x 39.5-meter steel hull and aluminium superstructure, the PMSP's Guardian-class Patrol Boat features a top speed of 20 knots, a range of up to 3,000 nautical miles, and accommodates up to 23 personnel. Its robust design and integrated navigation and communication systems make it ideal for extended patrols in challenging maritime environments.

Under PMSP, Australia has committed to supporting regional maritime security for the next 30 years. This includes the delivery of 24 Guardian-class Patrol Boats, 3 landing craft, and additional maritime assets such as a small loan fleet. The support package also features major maintenance and infrastructure sustainment, crew training through the Royal Australian Navy and commercial providers, in-country Navy advisers, contracted

aerial surveillance for intelligence-led patrols, and enhanced regional coordination and communication.

Lessons for Security Studies: From Editor's Chat with the Deputy Prime Minister

In addition to the official visit to Maldives by the Deputy Prime Minister, which made an auspicious event, the pledged gifting of the Guardian-class Patrol Boat also cultivates important thoughts for international relations and security studies students.

In a brief chat I had with him, the Deputy Prime Minister shared his thoughts and explained, not only the policy aspects, but also the ideas and shared interests that can define the present and future engagements between the two countries.

In response to questions regarding the role Maldives can play alongside Australia in promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific – and with Australia's recent gifting of a patrol boat to the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) – the Deputy Prime Minister reaffirmed the commitment to deepening defence and security cooperation between the two nations.

He highlighted that this creates significant opportunities for Maldives to enhance its maritime security capabilities and to engage more actively with regional navies, including Australia's.

The Deputy Prime Minister underscored the importance of Maldives' geographic location, particularly its position along the Eight Degree Channel – a critical maritime corridor that hosts major international shipping lanes and trade routes connecting Australia and other parts of the Indian Ocean. This, he noted, highlights the leadership of Maldives and its geographic positioning as a key factor in ensuring regional security.

The gifting of the patrol boat to the Maldives will reflect Australia's broader diplomatic and defence outreach to small states in the Indian Ocean. This outreach is rooted in Australia's recognition of the critical role small states, including the Pacific Islands, play in safeguarding the ocean for national and regional security.

Conceptual Base: Small States Agency

The Guardian-class Patrol Boat can enhance MNDF's force structure and operational readiness in addressing non-traditional security threats such as illegal fishing, drug trafficking, and maritime terrorism, bolstering the forces' capabilities to protect territorial waters and beyond.

This leadership role of Maldives in security may challenge traditional, neo-realist assumptions framing small states as passive actors in global affairs.

Historically, Cold War-era security frameworks, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), marginalised small states, preventing them from influencing strategic decision-making.² However, the post-Cold War era has witnessed a recalibration of this dynamic, including NATO's approach to regional security.

Small states like Maldives have leveraged their geostrategic positions to influence regional and global security agendas. For example, the Pacific Islands have navigated complex geopolitical terrains to maximise development and security gains.

According to the Lowy Institute's paper *Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Playing for Advantage*, Pacific Islands, like the Solomon Islands, have strategically positioned themselves as "friends to all, enemies to none," allowing them to leverage competition between major powers – such as China, Australia, and the United States – for political and economic benefit.³ This approach has enabled them to secure increased aid, infrastructure investment, and security cooperation.

The 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, adopted by the Pacific Islands, exemplifies the shift by articulating a collective security narrative that integrates traditional and non-traditional threats, including climate change, into regional development and security discourse.⁴

A similar effect was seen from the Maldives' active participation in climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since the 1980s, illustrating its capacity to shape global discourse.

The narrative on non-traditional threats to small states aligns with Australia's defence and security strategy, incorporating climate-threat narratives into military readings.

Australia-Maldives Defence Cooperation

Australia's defence cooperation with Maldives has deepened significantly in recent years. The establishment of the Australian High Commission in Malé in 2023 – officially inaugurated on 2 June 2025, by the Deputy Prime Minister (in his visit to Maldives) and the Maldives' Minister of Agriculture and Animal Welfare Dr. Mariyam Mariya – has come with many avenues of cooperation, including community engagements, building confidence and people-to-people relationships, and creating a sense of mutual belonging in the spaces of engagement.⁵

Australia's diplomatic presence has enhanced mutual understanding and trust.

The High Commission plays a pivotal role in coordinating defence initiatives, including joint security and strategic talks, search and rescue operations, and capacity-building programs.

Military-to-military engagement can enforce an act of defence diplomacy, creating an understanding of collective, but mutually exclusive, security interests, through cultural and narrative exchanges.

The delivery of the Guardian-class Patrol Boat will represent the next phase of this ongoing partnership. It will reflect Australia's strategic interest in supporting the maritime security capabilities of Indian Ocean littoral states. As Australia and Maldives share the Eastern Indian Ocean (EIO), they face common maritime threats such as transnational crimes, illegal fishing, and environmental degradation.⁶

The patrol boat can enhance the MNDF's ability to monitor and secure its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), actively participating in and contributing to Australia's EIO operations at sea.

In the joint media release by the two countries, the Deputy Prime Minister stated:⁷

Australia is proud to partner with Maldives to support its maritime security capability.

In line with our National Defence Strategy, Australia is working with partners across the Northeast Indian Ocean to maintain regional security and stability.

Australia is pleased to gift a Guardian-class Patrol Boat to Maldives and will continue to seek opportunities to deepen our long-standing defence partnership.

As Indian Ocean countries, Australia and Maldives share a vision of our region that is peaceful, stable and prosperous.

Maldives' Minister of Defence, Hon Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon stated:

Our nations are bound by a mutual commitment to the safety and security of the seas – particularly in the vital area of search and rescue operations, where we share a common border.

It is with deep appreciation and sincere gratitude that we acknowledge the generous gift of hydrographic equipment and a Guardian-class Patrol Boat from the Government of Australia.

The gifting of a Guardian-class Patrol Boat to the Maldives National Defence Force is a testament to the strong and enduring partnership between our nations.

Gifting a Guardian-class Patrol Boat to the Maldives brings us closer to the realisation of His Excellency President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's vision of doubling the strength of the Maldives Coast Guard.

Conclusion: Towards a Resilient Indo-Pacific

The Australia-Maldives partnership exemplifies the importance of inclusive security frameworks that recognise the agency of small states and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to regional stability. The gifting of the Guardian-class Patrol Boat will be more than a bilateral defence initiative; this will be a strategic investment in a shared vision of maritime security, resilience, and cooperation, especially in an era where the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the epicentre of geopolitical contestation and maritime cooperation.

Author

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The

Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

-
1. Australian Government. (2025). Pacific Maritime Security Program.
 2. Atlantic Council of Finland. (2004). Small states and NATO.
 3. Keen, M., & Tidwell, A. (2024). Geopolitics in the Pacific Islands: Playing for advantage — Competition among development partners in the region needs to be harnessed to lift standards and development outcomes. *Lowy Institute*.
 4. Pacific Islands Forum. (2018). Boe Declaration on Regional Security.
 5. Rehan, M. (2025). Australia opens first-ever High Commission in the Maldives. *Sun News*.
 6. Singh, L., & Baker, L. (n.d.). Australia's shared security in the Indian Ocean. *The Interpreter*.
 7. Australian Government. (2025). Joint media release: Maldives to receive Guardian-class patrol boat from Australia.

Tracing Climate-Induced IUU Fishing Patterns: A Maritime Security Strategy for Small States

By Dr Athaulla A Rasheed &
Dr Ahmed Riyaz Jauharee

Analysis

Published in MSO, 27 May 2025

Introduction

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a critical factor shaping the maritime security domain, particularly for small states like Maldives. With over 98 per cent of its territory comprising the ocean, the Maldives' national security is inherently about protecting the maritime space. The country's ability to manage and protect its maritime resources is also a matter of survival.

Climate change introduces new opportunities and challenges to this task. On the one hand, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and increasingly erratic

weather patterns complicate maritime governance and enforcement. On the other hand, observing these challenges draws further scholarly and policy attention.

In Maldives, an important area of concern is the rise in Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing. Between 2016 and 2020, Maldives experienced a consistent year-on-year increase in apparent foreign fishing effort.¹ This trend was particularly pronounced in 2018, when the number of apparent foreign fishing efforts surged by 250 per cent compared to the previous year. The upward trajectory continued, albeit at a slower rate, with increases of 146 per cent in 2019 and 23 per cent in 2020.

Although the absolute scale of apparent foreign fishing in Maldivian waters remains relatively low at present, the accelerating trend raises concerns. If foreign fishing activity continues to grow at a similar pace, it could pose a threat to the livelihoods of Maldivian fishers, who rely heavily on marine resources within the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

A significant percentage of illegal fishing vessels have been apprehended in Maldivian waters – according to the 2017 record, 400 illegal fishing vessels were caught in Maldives –, highlighting the scale of the issue. Climate-induced changes in ocean conditions can further exacerbate IUU fishing, undermining the Maldives' maritime security efforts. Understanding these dynamics is essential for small states to navigate their security interests within the broader regional maritime security architecture.

Small States at Sea

In international relations, small states are considered weak states. Maldives, like other Indian Ocean small states, plays a limited role in shaping regional security, which is largely influenced by great powers such as India and its Indo-Pacific partners – the United States, Australia, and Japan. These powers have constructed a regional maritime security architecture.

The Indian Ocean small states are exogenously incorporated into the Indo-Pacific security architecture, and this can limit the capabilities of

Maldives or Sri Lanka, for example, to achieve security objectives, mostly focused on non-traditional threats such as climate change.

Nevertheless, small states have demonstrated resilience and agency, particularly in climate diplomacy. Over the past four decades, they have successfully shaped global climate narratives, asserting their right to exist and develop in the face of existential threats. However, translating this influence into the security domain has proven more difficult. For example, the United Nations Security Council has been reluctant to adopt resolutions explicitly linking climate change to security, reflecting a broader hesitancy to securitise non-traditional threats like climate change.

This lack of consensus at the international level can deny efforts to integrate climate change into regional maritime security strategies. Yet, by analysing the shifting patterns of IUU fishing and the migratory patterns of tuna due to ocean temperature changes, small states can identify strategic entry points to influence maritime security agendas.

IUU Fishers and the Tuna Fishing Community

The experiences of the Pacific Islands offer valuable parallels. Like Maldives, countries such as Fiji occupy vast EEZs and depend heavily on marine resources for food security and economic stability. Tuna, in particular, is a critical resource that must be sustainably managed. Regional frameworks, including those supported by Australia, have helped the Pacific Islands to safeguard their maritime domain.

However, climate change has been disrupting these efforts. For example, a rise in sea surface temperature and climate change have altered tuna migration patterns, affecting both local fishers and IUU fishing patterns. Community fishers are increasingly forced to venture into unfamiliar and potentially hazardous waters, raising safety concerns and economic risks.

For example, in Kiribati, with climate change, fishers have reported travelling farther offshore with fish movements, increasing their exposure to maritime hazards.² Simultaneously, IUU fishers are adapting their behaviour, moving into new territories as fish

stocks shift. As a result of climate-induced fish mobility, surveillance and enforcement can get complicated – i.e., in small states, this could include straining the limited resources of maritime security agencies. Subsequent encounters between IUU fishers and local communities can furthermore escalate social tensions and threaten livelihoods, while also undermining the capacity of states to protect their maritime sphere.

Spatially, foreign fishing activity is concentrated near the periphery of Maldives' EEZ. This distribution pattern may reflect enforcement practices, with stronger monitoring and deterrence measures inside and beyond EEZs to deny unauthorised fishing in those areas.

In terms of gear type, drifting longliners dominate foreign fishing in Maldivian waters, accounting for 98 per cent of the total apparent foreign fishing activities. By contrast, the use of trawl nets and purse seines – both prohibited within Maldives' EEZ – was minimal, together constituting less than 1 per cent of all recorded foreign fishing effort. Most of the apparent foreign fishing effort is attributed to vessels flagged to neighbouring countries.

Despite the rapid rate of increase in IUU fishing in recent years, the overall volume of unauthorised foreign fishing remains modest. Annual apparent foreign fishing hours have never exceeded 2,000, with the peak occurring in 2020. That year, foreign vessels operating within Maldivian waters logged an average of just 40 fishing hours per vessel.

Maritime Security Strategy for Small States

Maldives aims to address these challenges by incorporating climate considerations into defence narratives. However, more comprehensive efforts are needed to assess how climate impacts affect security agencies', such as the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard's, ability to respond to potentially unforeseen IUU threats. This emphasises further investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, regional intelligence sharing mechanisms, and predictive models supporting national and regional efforts.

Maldives has engaged in multiple bilateral and trilateral exercises, such as the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka DOSTI maritime security exercises, which

have enhanced national and regional capabilities. These collaborations provide essential platforms for capacity building and operational readiness. This can expand.

However, the integration of climate modelling and narratives into these security exercises remains inconsistent. While Maldives has acknowledged climate change as a security concern, there is limited evidence of systematic research or policy development addressing the specific impacts of climate change on maritime security operations.

For instance, the community implications of climate-induced shifts in IUU fishing patterns on the operational capacity of the Coast Guard remain underexplored. Addressing this gap requires interdisciplinary research and policy innovation that bridges climate science and security studies.

Conclusion

By framing security challenges through a climate lens, small states can garner international attention and support. The threat posed by IUU fishing – exacerbated by climate change – can project a need for integrated, interagency, and regional strategies.

Authors

Dr Ahmed Riyaz Jauharee is Dean of the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences at The Maldives National University (MNU). Dr Riyaz does research in Fisheries Ecology and Marine Biology. He has worked on Tuna Ecology in the Maldives, especially looking at tuna aggregations around anchored FADs.

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaulla also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

community resilience in the face of global climate change.

Maritime Security Dilemmas: The Indian Ocean Islands and the Quest for Regional Stability

By Professor Christian Bueger

MSO launching Series Analysis

12 May 2025

Introduction

Small Island Developing States exercise governance over approximately 30 per cent of the world's oceans through their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), a vast maritime jurisdiction that confers upon them significant influence and profound responsibilities for ocean stewardship. This extensive maritime domain positions these nations more accurately as “large ocean states” rather than small island states – a shift that reflects their true geopolitical importance despite their limited terrestrial footprint and modest populations.

For island nations, the ocean represents far more than a geographical feature – it constitutes the foundation of their economic vitality, cultural identity, and food security. Blue economy sectors, particularly fishing and marine tourism, frequently comprise substantial proportions of national gross domestic product (GDP), with some island states deriving up to 40 to 50 per cent of their economic activity from ocean-based industries. This profound economic dependence renders maritime security not merely important but existentially critical to the national security of island states.

Complex Security Challenges in the Western Indian Ocean

The strategic positioning of island nations such as the Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles has naturally evolved them into leading advocates for the global responsibility to protect the sea. Their advocacy stems from practical necessity – these nations lack the human capital, financial resources, and technological capabilities to independently combat the sophisticated transnational maritime crimes that plague their waters. The Western Indian

-
1. World Bank. (2024). Country environmental analysis: Maldives – Towards a more sustainable and resilient blue economy.
 2. UNDP Climate. (2023). Locally-sourced: How Kiribati is shoring up food security and

Ocean region exemplifies this challenge, where a complex web of security threats includes sophisticated narcotics smuggling operations, irregular migration flows, industrial-scale illicit fishing, and the persistent menace of Somali-based piracy that, despite international efforts, continues to evolve and adapt.

The region's position astride critical global shipping lanes compounds these challenges exponentially. Nearly 40 per cent of global seaborne oil passes through the Western Indian Ocean, with thousands of vessels transiting daily. This intense maritime traffic exposes island nations to catastrophic risks, including potential oil spills, ship groundings, and marine pollution incidents that could devastate their pristine marine environments and tourism-dependent economies. The 2020 MV Wakashio oil spill off Mauritius, which released 1,000 tonnes of oil into ecologically sensitive waters, starkly illustrated these vulnerabilities.

Regional Cooperation Mechanisms and Their Limitations

The inherently transnational character of maritime security threats, combined with the capacity constraints of large ocean states, necessitates robust regional cooperation mechanisms and sustained international support. The Western Indian Ocean has witnessed the emergence of several institutional frameworks designed to address these challenges. The U.S.-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) coordinates multinational naval operations, while the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), facilitated by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), provides a framework for regional policy cooperation and the coordination of capacity-building projects.

Central to regional efforts is the Regional Maritime Security Architecture (RMSA), spearheaded by the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). The RMSA's operational backbone comprises two sophisticated centres: the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar and the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) in Seychelles. These facilities enable real-time information sharing, maritime domain awareness, and coordinated responses to security incidents. However, the architecture faces significant gaps –

notably, key regional states, including the Maldives and Sri Lanka remain outside the framework. Their absence partially stems from persistent terra-centric thinking that mischaracterises the RMSA as an “African” rather than a truly “Western Indian Ocean” initiative, undermining the ocean-centric perspective essential for effective maritime governance.

The Militarisation Dilemma

The region confronts a particularly acute militarisation dilemma that epitomises the complexities of contemporary maritime security. Effective responses to maritime threats require substantial naval capabilities that most island states cannot independently maintain, necessitating support from international navies. Yet this increased military presence risks transforming the Western Indian Ocean into an arena of great power competition, potentially destabilising the very region these forces aim to secure. Recent years have witnessed growing naval deployments from China, India, the United States, and European nations, each pursuing distinct strategic objectives while ostensibly contributing to maritime security.

Managing this delicate balance demands sophisticated diplomatic mechanisms and transparency, and confidence-building measures. Two regional institutions play pivotal roles: the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) forum facilitates navy-to-navy coordination and includes private sector maritime stakeholders, while the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activities (CGIMA) operates at the diplomatic level, providing a crucial platform for dialogue and confidence-building among regional and extra-regional actors. Ensuring that these mechanisms work well and are supported is essential to managing the militarisation dilemma.

Critical Maritime Infrastructure Protection

While traditional maritime security concerns – piracy, trafficking, and illicit fishing – dominate regional agendas, the protection of critical maritime infrastructure represents an underappreciated yet increasingly vital dimension. For example, submarine fibre-optic cables, carrying over 99 per cent of international data traffic, constitute the

arteries of the global digital economy. Many island nations depend on just one or two cable connections, creating single points of failure that could sever their digital connectivity.

Emerging maritime infrastructure challenges extend to the renewable energy transition. Offshore wind farms, tidal energy installations, and floating solar arrays represent crucial components of island nations' strategies to achieve energy independence and meet climate commitments. These installations require sophisticated protection against both intentional threats and natural hazards, demanding new security frameworks and capabilities. While the IOC, for instance, has a subsea data cable protection strategy, critical maritime infrastructure protection is not yet featured sufficiently in the regional maritime security strategy.

Charting the Way Forward

The maritime security challenges facing Indian Ocean island nations encapsulate the complexities of contemporary ocean governance. These "large ocean states" must navigate between competing imperatives: leveraging international naval support while preventing militarisation, protecting critical infrastructure with limited resources, and building inclusive regional frameworks that transcend artificial continental divisions.

Success requires these states to fully embrace their maritime identity in international forums while strengthening diplomatic mechanisms like SHADE and CGIMA to manage great power presence constructively. Critical infrastructure protection – from submarine cables to offshore renewable energy – demands urgent elevation on security agendas, building on initiatives like the IOC's cable protection strategy.

Conclusion

The experiences of these island nations offer crucial lessons for global maritime security. Their ability to secure vast ocean territories with limited means, balance sovereignty with cooperation, and reconcile development with security will significantly influence international ocean governance. As maritime domains become increasingly central to planetary health and human security, the strategies

pioneered by these large ocean states may well define the future of global maritime security.

Author

Christian Bueger is a professor of international relations at the University of Copenhagen and a research fellow at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). He is the author of Understanding Maritime Security (Oxford University Press, 2024, with Timothy Edmunds) and has explored questions of international security and global governance in more than 200 publications. He holds a PhD from the European University Institute. Further information is available on his personal website at www.bueger.info

War, History and Small States' Security: Navigating the Maldives' Role in the Second World War

By Assistant Professor Ahmed Zaki Nafiz

MSO launching Series Analysis

12 May 2025

Introduction

On Easter Sunday in April 1942, the Japanese air force raided Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), bombing Colombo and Trincomalee and destroying British military facilities and warships in the vicinity. For the British, the damage was significant, damaging the port, losing an aircraft carrier, two destroyers, a few other ships and HMS Hermes, an aircraft carrier. However, the Japanese, realized, unlike what they had achieved in Pearl Harbour in December 1941, they had failed in destroying Britain's Eastern Fleet, which was based in Trincomalee – i.e., the intelligence tipped the British Eastern Fleet to make a strategic retreat to Kilindini Kenya and then to Addu (southernmost atoll) in the Maldives.

The moment the British warships, escaping and fighting the German and Japanese submarines and aircraft in the Indian Ocean, entered the Maldives' waters marked a pivotal point that drew the Maldives, militarily, into the Second World War. It was also logical to believe that, being a British protectorate, the Maldives' war plans, including the locals' and the government's engagements, would

be drafted according to the British strategy in the region.

Back then, the Maldives' foreign policy was dictated by the British, and hence, how the country has positioned itself in regional battles was shaped by a mix of British tactics and local knowledge and resources.

Militarising a small coastal state and strategic hotspot

The British warships escaping the 1942 Japanese raid, heading further down the southwest to an unknown destination in the Indian Ocean – i.e., the Maldives' territory –, were sighted by a Japanese aircraft. Subsequently, a Japanese submarine carried out several unsuccessful scouting missions around the Maldives' waters, failing to locate the British warships. However, given the Maldives' strategic location in the southwest of Sri Lanka, the country was a prime suspect for harbouring the British warships. Around the same time, both Japanese and German submarine activities (the enemy forces) were, nevertheless, on the rise in the Indian Ocean and getting closer to the Maldives – i.e., later that year, the enemy forces destroyed ships and disrupting the Allied Forces' supply chains (this includes, the British and its allies' ships) linking to the Indian Ocean.

Given the strategic location of Addu – i.e., about 600 miles southwest of Sri Lanka and 700 miles north of Diego Garcia –, the Maldives's territory was crucial for the Allied Forces in rescue efforts in the Arabian Sea, especially the British trade routes, as well as protecting the supply routes in the Indian Ocean, used for sending cargo through Red Sea and to north Africa, to Persian Gulf and through inland to the Soviet front and to assist in the supply of troops for the war in East Asia region, especially in Malaysia, Singapore and Burma.

At the time the Japanese air raid to cripple the British Eastern Fleet in Sri Lanka, Japan was unaware of Port T, the secret military base in the Maldives which was already operational and able to give support services to the Allied naval and shipping fleet, in the southwest Indian Ocean. When the news of an imminent Sri Lanka raid was confirmed, the British Forces had moved much of

the Eastern Fleet to Kilindini in Kenya and Addu in the Maldives, saving most of the ships of the Eastern Fleet that was crucial in defending, defeating, and preventing enemy attacks and activities in the Indian ocean.

Port T in Addu remained unknown and undiscovered by the enemy forces until the latter years of the War in 1944, when a German U-boat torpedoed British Loyalty, a fuel storage ship, anchored in Addu Atoll. The sound of the explosion and the fireballs produced by the spilling fuel, lighting up the night sky, and witnessed by the locals, sounded the alarm bells of a chilling reality of the danger Addu Atoll could be in, especially if the Atoll became a target of larger enemy raids, like the one met by the British's Sri Lanka base in April 1942.

Localising a regional war, great power impacts

Until then, in the innocent minds of the locals, who were living with the British troops in Addu, it was more of an opportunity to sell local goods to the visitors or watch the visiting submarines, warships, and aircraft carriers in their Atoll. Little did they realise – not until the British Loyalty explosion – that living with World War soldiers also involved facing a grim sense of fear and insecurity and becoming a direct target of an enemy attack.

Even much before the British Loyalty explosion, Maldivians were already facing the hardships associated with food shortages, famine, and hunger, creating economic and social concerns for the island communities – this was marked as the worst famine in the country's history.

Immediately after the Japanese raids on Colombo and Trincomalee in 1942, local merchant vessels from the Maldives ceased operations between the two countries due to security concerns. This disruption had dire consequences for a nation heavily reliant on imported food and fuel, exacerbating the ongoing famine and its hardships. Additionally, the surrounding seas became perilous for fishing, further deepening the struggles of an already suffering population.

Despite the fear and cries for help, the hopelessness of a widespread famine and mass starvation, leading to multiple daily deaths in some islands, the Maldives and its people stood as a staunch partner

and participant, doing whatever and however they could, in their effort to help the Allied Forces' war efforts, and bring back life as it was in their seas.

The terms of national foreign policy

The Maldivian Government – i.e., as a British protectorate, the Maldives' rule was given a level of political independence to run domestic issues – decided to give the whole Addu Atoll to the British war efforts. The locals there would end up taking part in these efforts. The risk factors of this decision were more of a reality than an imagination after the Sri Lanka incident.

Rather than weighing the pain, suffering and devastation the Second World War had brought to the shores of the nation, the Addu decision was taken as a national interest, an obligation to stand by with Britain, in their efforts to end the War – i.e., demonstrating the Maldives' role in achieving global order, peace and security. Despite the small size, the decision to align with the British cause helped the Maldives to navigate its security in the regional conflict, successfully bringing this Indian Ocean war chapter to an end.

Conclusion

The lesson we had learnt was that the Maldives' role in the Second World War showed the strategic importance and the central role this small state had played in shaping strategic partnerships, to protect its territory and show commitment to support a global war campaign.

Author

Dr Ahmed Zaki Nafiz is an Assistant Professor in Journalism at the Maldives National University. He holds a PhD in Journalism from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. At The Maldives National University, Dr Zaki teaches Journalism, Politics and Maldivian History. Currently, his main research interest is writing about War, History and Politics, related to the Maldives.

Engaging Security and Academic Discourse: Research Development at MNU

Dr Athaulla A Rasheed &
Dr Raheema Abdul Raheem

MSO launching Series Analysis

12 May 2025

Introduction

Universities in the United States (US) are key anchors of security and defence research. For example, the US National Security Agency's (NSA) Science of Security (SoS) partnerships to expand academia have incorporated multidisciplinary issues into research projects, including areas of renewable energy and resources and healthcare, to improve researchers and students' knowledge of cybersecurity management of healthcare issues related to technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

Security research is not limited to analysing a single interest – i.e., research is the knowledge platform that collects, analyses, collates and distributes complex datasets, in multiple fields, projecting innovative solutions for national issues.

As a place of cultivating future researchers and innovators, The Maldives National University (MNU) provides an academic platform, with research and policy innovation tools, to develop security discourse across multiple disciplines, to shape the Maldives' national security and foreign policy. MNU can be pivotal in shaping policy solutions, and hence, a national research agenda to determine how the Maldives positions itself in the global security domain.

Constructing the research-operations nexus

The national defence plays a central role in determining a country's national security and foreign policy position. For the Maldives, dealing with the multifaceted challenges posed by national and international events – i.e., including maritime incidents, natural disasters and regional conflicts and inter-state wars – requires comprehensive mechanisms, backed by complete information systems, to cut costs and maximise results in

security operations. Moreover, a centrally governed research and development system is required to collate the complex sets of data generated by these challenges.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) operates in this purview to enhance security-related social science research, inform DoD policymakers on global social and cultural forces, train military leaders in social science methods, and boost cooperation between civilian and military educational institutions – for example, the Department of Defense’s Minerva Research Initiative is noted.

The Australian National University (ANU) conducts research fellowship programmes with the Australian military – for example, the ANU-AARC [Australian Army Research Centre (AARC)] Fellowships provide opportunities for ANU academics to collaborate with Army members to comprehend the strategic environment and research on selected topics to enhance the Army’s operational landscape.

This research-operations link plays a central role in shaping the security discourse – i.e., where the research has been conducted will have an impact on the national discourse.

For example, the Maldives has advanced human resources and infrastructure, with a high human development index, backed by multiple research platforms, starting from local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to bilateral and international donors’ projects. However, as a national issue, security must be studied through a well-structured and resource-rich system, and hence, MNU can form a foundational platform to manage security discourse, in collaboration with other national and foreign researchers.

Building Collective Discourse – MNU Research Expertise

MNU research expertise spans several fields and sectors, including but not limited to health, food security, marine resources and governance, maritime transportation and shipping, fisheries management, economic industries, and foreign affairs and trade relations. These areas are inherently linked to national security issues and policy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, MNU undertook a range of research projects and published papers addressing the multifaceted impacts of the crisis. These studies explored the economic impacts, health risks, and social security issues posed by the pandemic. MNU researchers delved into the economic strain on businesses and households, the public health responses, and the effectiveness of social safety nets.

Beyond pandemic-related research, MNU has been actively involved in community safety initiatives. Researchers conducted a public perception survey commissioned by the Maldives Police Service to gauge community sentiments on safety and security, drawing insights into public perception of law enforcement.

The focus on environmental management studies takes up another cluster of the multidisciplinary framework, examining the sustainable practices necessary to protect the Maldives’ unique ecosystem. Youth surveys have been conducted to understand the aspirations and challenges faced by the younger generation, informing policies that support their development in nation-building.

On peace and security, in collaboration with national agencies, MNU engages in national security topics like counter-terrorism, aiming to enhance evidence-based policymaking.

An Agenda for Collaboration in Security Studies

Addressing threats to security, including potential acts of terrorism, maritime piracy and drug trafficking, illegal fishing and rescue operations at sea requires coordination between security and non-security agencies. The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard, under the purview of the Ministry of Defence, coordinates maritime security operations with the Maldives Police Service and non-security agencies, such as the Maldives Customs Service (MCS). Such agencies have training institutions to develop frameworks to facilitate whole-of-government efforts to guarantee national security – for example, in advancing the combat and operational readiness, the College of Defence and Security Studies (CDSS) offers mission-focused training to MNDF soldiers and sailors.

The existing training capabilities can be further advanced through research collaboration with the academic platform – i.e., the university academics can provide multidisciplinary theories, concepts and international knowledge-based, and by incorporating operational data, one can generate innovative and sophisticated frameworks to develop and implement security policies. In this approach, MNU can collaborate with security sector institutions and benefit from research fellowship initiatives, pooling knowledge and human resources within and across sectors. These engagements can tap into bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field.

Conclusion

Advancing research engagements between academia and security agencies is essential for policy development and implementation. The Maldives faces unique challenges associated with its small size and resource capacity – i.e., understanding the aspect of security in the Maldives will significantly benefit from an advanced research platform. MNU, with its multiple fields of expertise, provides a foundation for advancing high-quality research to support the Maldives' national security agenda.

Authors

Dr. Raheema Abdul Raheem has been appointed as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Enterprise) at The Maldives National University (MNU) since December 2023. She holds a PhD in Public Health and has numerous publications in public health and awareness. Previously, as Dean of Research at MNU, she led over 40 research projects, secured funding, and served as vice-chair of the university ethics committee. Raheema also organised six Theveli and two IEEE conferences. Her notable research projects include SSAPI, leprosy strategy, soil-transmitted helminthiasis, Maldives Steps Survey, trans-fat survey, and dengue control using Wolbachia.

Athaula A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaula also holds two

PhDs in international and strategic studies and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

Connecting the Dots: Navigating Big Data Analytics for Maritime Security through Academic Platforms in the Maldives

By Dr Athaula A. Rasheed & Dr Ali Fawaz Shareef
MSO launching Series Analysis
12 May 2025

Introduction

The link between big data technology, maritime security and surveillance, and academic research platforms lies in leveraging the use of evidence-based analytics to navigate maritime security in maritime states. The Maldives is a small state, covering a large exclusive economic zone to ensure the security and safety of sea and land users. With growing challenges at sea, from drug trafficking activities to piracy and illegal fishing arising in foreign waters and lands, the Maldives has been advancing technologically savvy systems and collaborative efforts to drive maritime surveillance. Connecting situational information and operational capability using data analytics platforms, to link communications, understandings, and solutions on the ground, is key to these systems.

Considering security as a national priority, universities will be well-suited to managing data due to their inherent focus on research, analysis, and knowledge dissemination. The Maldives National University (MNU) is well-placed to initiate research projects and categorically bridge the gap between data analysis and maritime security surveillance by leveraging its expertise to gauge and use data science related to security priorities.

Maritime security, surveillance and data

Big data analytics can be used to analyse vast amounts of data from various sources (e.g., vessel tracking, sensor data, satellite imagery) to identify potential threats, predict maritime traffic patterns, and improve situational awareness. For example, the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean

Region (IFC-IOR), in India, plays a vital role in sharing data to support regional maritime domain awareness (MDA). For example, in 2024, the tabletop exercise (TTX) run by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in collaboration with IFC-IOR, used multiple datasets on legal processes to enhance MDA efforts and responses to maritime crimes.

While such regional platforms provide a comprehensive data system to help individual states address their issues, national systems remain pivotal in generating information to explain the situation on the ground.

For example, in the Maldives, the launch of the construction of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) marked the advancing role of data analytics in the security and defence domain. MRCC can operate at the national and regional levels in the realm of knowledge development and sharing for maritime surveillance operations. For example, institutional and resource limitations can diminish capacity. However, the efficient transfer of data – i.e., a construction of shared communication, by expertise, on responses or resolutions – can categorically impact operational capacities in security institutions.

The functional capacity of MRCC can benefit from an embedded knowledge system fostered by the academic platform – for example, universities are known for transparency and ethical groundings of knowledge, and hence, promote an evidence-based data system for institutional collaboration.

Academic Institutions' Role and MNU

Academic institutions can offer specialised programs in fields like data science and technology. In collaboration with researchers, the Maldives National University (MNU) can pioneer studies on the application of big data in addressing maritime challenges. By leveraging large datasets, they can analyse oceanic conditions, shipping routes, and marine biodiversity patterns. For example, with the multi-disciplinary approach to maritime studies, the MNU's College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences fosters a platform for data discovery, analysis and collaboration between national and international bodies, creating an

information system to protect marine resources. This platform can bring together multiple datasets to address maritime challenges to national security.

Across the Indo-Pacific, the Australian National University (ANU) leads academic engagements supporting the Australian Defence in developing maritime data for Pacific Island countries. For example, the ANU's National Security College (NSC), through initiatives like MDA 3.0, focuses on understanding the complexity of information and intelligence-sharing in the Indian Ocean – i.e., connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. This includes improving intelligence gathering, analysis, and sharing, which is crucial to improve MDA and security operations in the Pacific, including supporting the Australian Government's collaborative efforts, through ANU-supported Pacific Security College and the Pacific Fusion Centre, a regional data body under the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

With its multidisciplinary framework, the MNU can expand the scope of big data analytics in maritime security operations by incorporating the activities of different faculties and their areas of study related to security issues. For example, like fisheries issues, managing shipping data, exploring engineering and innovative technologies by the Internet of Things (IoT), and navigating national interests at the regional level can together simplify a complex environment of many issues relevant to the maritime security domain.

While big data can help understand the environmental impacts of shipping routes on marine ecosystems, this multidisciplinary academic platform can analyse, collate and disseminate the data on those impacts, to project policy-informed security discourses. This information can be used to develop sustainable practices in the maritime security domain.

International Collaboration and Security through Technology

Big data technology can facilitate the Maldives navigate its national priorities in regional and international frameworks, including the United Nations (UN) and the Indian Ocean bodies, on security issues. For example, the MNU's 2025

Conference on Climate Resilient Agriculture for Food Security brings together national and international experiences to address the interconnections between food security, climate change and development in the Maldives.

In the maritime domain, by sharing data and insights across borders, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives run military-based security and surveillance operations. The idea of security extends beyond the military domain in the Maldives, and incorporating issues like climate-based disasters into security policy would require extending data also beyond the national systems. For example, maritime security governance is a resource-draining activity for the Maldives and working together to address mutual challenges and enhance regional security is crucial. The IFC-IOR is a prime example of how regional cooperation can be strengthened through data sharing for joint operations.

With enhanced technological capabilities, MNU can collaborate with national security sector agencies to bring field experts from different countries. This collaboration will complement the Government's national initiatives, such as the 'Maldives 2.0' initiative, which aims to innovate public services by digitising operations, developing innovative solutions, and sharing best practices.

Conclusion

The field of big data offers a powerful tool for enhancing maritime security and surveillance, and an academic platform like MNU can play a vital role in equipping the next generation of professionals with the knowledge and skills to effectively leverage this technology. By integrating big data into education, research, and international collaboration, the Maldives can expand its knowledge of maritime security capabilities and contribute to regional and global security discourses.

Authors

Dr Ali Fawaz Shareef is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Affairs) at the Maldives National University. He holds a PhD in Information Systems from Massey University, New Zealand, and has held prominent positions, including Vice Chancellor of MNU and Rector of Cyryx College. Fawaz specialises

in eLearning, data science, and research and has made significant contributions to national education reforms and eLearning in the Maldives.

Athaula A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaula also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

Academic Platform for National Security: Streamlining Multidisciplinary Faculty at The Maldives National University

By Dr Athaula A. Rasheed &
Dr Aishath Shehenaz Adam

MSO launching Series Analysis

12 May 2025

Introduction

In today's interconnected world, national security extends beyond traditional military concerns to encompass economic resilience, environmental sustainability, social stability, technological readiness, and geopolitical strategy. For a small island nation like the Maldives, where national security is deeply rooted in its unique geographical and societal context, and where vulnerabilities are shaped by geographic isolation and limited resources, a holistic and forward-looking approach is essential.

Addressing these complex challenges requires integrating diverse perspectives and fostering collaboration across disciplines. As the national university, The Maldives National University (MNU) is uniquely positioned to lead this effort. Through its multidisciplinary academic structure, MNU supports research, education, innovation, and policy engagement that collectively contribute to national resilience.

MNU's academic platform serves as a vital enabler of national security by bridging the gap between theory and practice and aligning its work with national and regional priorities.

The Multidisciplinary Approach to National Security

The complexities of national security will greatly benefit from academic platforms. At its core, national security encompasses elements of law, economics, environmental science, technology, sociology, political science, and more. MNU's multidisciplinary faculty facilitates the convergence of these fields, fostering a dynamic and interconnected understanding of security. MNU's mission is to foster excellence not only in specialised disciplines but also in their integration, which can lead to the development of solutions that address the multifaceted nature of national security challenges.

For example, in the context of the Maldives, climate change and environmental security are paramount. The country's vulnerability to climate change, rising sea levels, and natural disasters emphasises the need for expertise in environmental science, disaster management, and sustainable development. Simultaneously, economic security, influenced by tourism, fisheries, and trade, requires insights from economics, business studies, and international relations. By embracing a multidisciplinary approach, MNU creates academic platforms that bring together scholars and practitioners from these disciplines, equipping society with the tools to navigate these intertwined challenges effectively through sustainable and context-appropriate solutions.

Fostering Research and Innovation

An academic platform for national security must prioritise research and innovation as core components of its mission. At the heart of MNU's contribution is research, which serves as a hub for knowledge generation, promoting inquiry that tackles critical security issues. Through collaborative research projects, the university explores innovative solutions to contemporary challenges that are both locally grounded and globally informed. These projects not only enhance the understanding of security dynamics but also contribute to the formulation of evidence-based policies and strategies.

In the Maldivian context, research initiatives might focus on areas such as maritime security, sustainable resource management, cybersecurity, and regional cooperation. By leveraging its multidisciplinary faculty, MNU can provide comprehensive analyses that inform decision-making and policy development. Additionally, the university's emphasis on innovation encourages the adoption of cutting-edge technologies and methodologies, ensuring that national security measures remain adaptive and forward-looking.

Bridging Academic and Practical Knowledge

One of the strengths of MNU's academic platform is its ability to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application. National security challenges often require actionable solutions that resonate with societal realities. MNU fosters this connection by engaging students, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in collaborative efforts. The university acts as a catalyst for dialogue, bringing together stakeholders to discuss, analyse, and address security concerns.

For instance, MNU might organise forums, workshops, and conferences that enable the exchange of ideas between academics and professionals. These events serve as platforms for disseminating research findings, sharing best practices, and building collaborative networks. By involving practitioners from various sectors—such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and international partners—MNU ensures that its academic endeavours translate into meaningful contributions to national security.

Regional and Global Interconnectivity

The Maldives' position in the Indian Ocean highlights the importance of regional and global interconnectivity in addressing national security challenges. Issues such as maritime security, transnational crime, and climate change require coordinated, cross-border solutions. MNU recognises this interconnectivity and incorporates it into its academic approach.

Through partnerships with regional and international institutions, MNU facilitates knowledge sharing and cooperation. Collaborative research projects, exchange programs, and joint initiatives enhance

the university's capacity to address security concerns. For example, MNU might work with counterparts in neighbouring countries to develop strategies for sustainable ocean governance, combating illegal fishing, or improving disaster response mechanisms. By fostering regional and global collaboration, MNU contributes to the collective effort to ensure security in the Indian Ocean region.

Empowering Future Leaders

An academic platform for national security must also prioritise empowering future leaders who can navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world. MNU's multidisciplinary faculty plays a crucial role in educating and mentoring students, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to address security challenges effectively. Through its programs, the university cultivates critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and a sense of responsibility among its students.

In the Maldives, this approach is particularly relevant as the country faces distinctive and evolving challenges that require innovative solutions. By nurturing a generation of leaders who are well-versed in the principles of national security, MNU ensures that the nation is prepared to respond to emerging threats and opportunities.

Conclusion

As the Maldives faces a complex and evolving security landscape, MNU is committed to strengthening national resilience through a multidisciplinary academic platform. By fostering research, innovation, education, and collaboration, it will help shape informed security strategies and empower future leaders. MNU remains dedicated to building a secure, sustainable, and sovereign future for the nation and the region.

Authors

Dr Aishath Shehenaz Adam is the Vice-Chancellor of the Maldives National University. She holds a PhD in Mathematics Education from the University of Auckland and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. With extensive experience in the education sector, she has held senior leadership roles at the Ministry of Education.

Dr. Adam also served as High Commissioner to Pakistan and Ambassador to the UAE, and has made significant contributions to national and international education initiatives.

Athaula A Rasheed is the Head of Centre at the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies at The Maldives National University. A former foreign service officer and diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maldives, Athaula also holds two PhDs in international and strategic studies, and political science from ANU and the University of Queensland, Australia.

Editor's Remarks: Chat with the Chancellor of The Maldives National University

By Dr Athaula A Rasheed
Editor for the MSO launching Series
12 May 2025

It is my privilege to announce and welcome you to the launching series of the Maldives Security Outlook (MSO), an online academic journal for security practitioners, thinkers, writers, and readers, managed and run by the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS) at The Maldives National University (MNU). I extend my gratitude and congratulations to MNU, with special thanks to the Marketing team for supporting this process. Congratulations to the authors of the launching series.

I had the opportunity to meet Dr Mahamood Shougee, Chancellor of MNU, to have a chat about MNU's role in advancing security research and knowledge in the Maldives. Discussing his thoughts on the launching of an academic platform for advancing security and strategic studies in the Maldives, Dr Shougee noted:

The discipline of security and strategic studies is not entirely new to the Maldives. The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), Maldives Police Service, and other law enforcement agencies are engaged in training and operations related to both internal and external security challenges.

I believe there is a need for an academic institution, such as the Maldives National University (MNU), and

law enforcement agencies to collaborate in creating a national framework for security and strategic studies. Such a security framework could focus not just on internal security within the Maldives but also on regional and international issues. For example, our own marine security issues are interrelated to those of our neighbouring countries. Due to its strategically important location in the Indian Ocean, Maldivian security is intrinsically linked to both regional and global security issues.

Regarding MNU's decision to establish the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies, Chancellor noted:

MNU—as the leading higher education institution in the country—recognises its role in spearheading a national platform of security and strategic studies, a platform for high-quality research, knowledge creation, awareness raising, and training.

The Maldivian economy is based on tourism and ocean resources. Peace, stability, and security are integral to our social and economic development. President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has emphasised the role of higher education institutions, research, and evidence-based policymaking for national development. This emphasis of the President on the role of research in policy development inspired the formation of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS) at MNU. The aim of CSSS is to provide a national platform that contributes high-quality research and publications that support policy and strategy development in national security matters.

Integrating security practices and knowledge requires an academic setting. This is especially the case in dealing with multiple impact areas such as health, environment, fishing and food systems. For example, in the maritime security domain, it is not only traditional threats, like state-sponsored military confrontations, that affects our security thinking and policy. A rather complex system of traditional and non-traditional threats affects multiple sectors and sea uses, including fishers and commercial industries. These are interconnected threat areas that traverse multiple national and foreign boundaries. Discussing his thoughts on MNU's multidisciplinary framework in advancing security discourse, the Chancellor explained:

Security is inherently multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary. For instance, public health, food security, and social security are interconnected. Environmental sustainability and technological advancement are intertwined with economic development and security. Socio-economic stability and national harmony are interlinked to the efforts to counter terrorism.

MNU, an institution that embodies a plethora of interrelated disciplines and expertise, is an ideal setting for CSSS; the academic milieu of MNU fosters cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary, and international collaboration. Thus, being placed within MNU, CSSS is well-positioned to achieve its objective of becoming a truly multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary centre for security and strategic studies.

In an interconnected world, security issues also must be addressed through global partnerships. The Maldives has taken a strategic approach to integrated sectoral knowledge and international best practice. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on sustained collaboration and resource allocation, and MNU's role can acquire an umbrella function, to drive researchers and policymakers in shaping national and global security dialogues. Finally, discussing his thoughts on future engagements between MNU and security sector agencies globally, Dr Shougee said:

The Maldives is advancing its national interests while contributing to broader geopolitical and international relations dialogues. As the national university, MNU is striving to become an internationally recognised academic institution, offering globally benchmarked programs and research projects. Collaboration with several United Nations agencies, multilateral partners, and reputed foreign universities underscores MNU's commitment to fostering high-standard academic engagements and recognition internationally. MNU's researchers engage in regional and international research, seminars, and conferences.

Guided by MNU's internationalisation strategy, I believe CSSS will facilitate internationally relevant research in collaboration with global partners. Such research would drive policymaking, not just within the Maldives, but also regionally, with global

perspectives. CSSS is likely to develop expertise in areas such as maritime, oceans, and environmental security with data analytics. Along the way, CSSS will be supporting the government's efforts to establish the Maldives as a leading small-state actor in global security affairs.

Under your (Dr. Athaulla A. Rasheed) leadership, and with the guidance of Vice-Chancellor Dr. Shehenaz Adam, I am confident that CSSS will become an internationally recognised centre of excellence for security and strategic studies – one that produces high-quality research, publications, and teaching that are regionally responsive and internationally informed.

There is room to develop the discourse in security and strategic studies in the Maldives. This will happen in collaboration with national security agencies and regional actors. Maldives Security Outlook invites scholars and policymakers to share their experience and expert knowledge in this academic platform and help establish stronger connections between academic discourse, policy and practice in this field. In this launching series, we have introduced MNU and its academic objectives and international perspectives and frameworks from leading experts.

MNU's role in this will be enhanced by collaboration within the University and with its national and international partners. I look forward to further enhance this. Maldives Security Outlook (MSO) will serve as a starting point.



*An academic production of the Centre for Security and Strategic Studies (CSSS) of
The Maldives National University*

*Designed by the Marketing Department of
The Maldives National University*

*The Maldives National University (MNU)
Rahdhebai Higun, Machangolhi
Malé, Maldives*

Copyright©2025CSSS