



## **View Point**

### **Wu Bangguo's visit to the Maldives**

*Amruta Karambelkar\**

Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China (NPC) visited Maldives between 28-30 May 2011. This is the first visit of a top Chinese legislator to the island state. During the visit, both countries agreed on enhancing bilateral relations through closer cooperation between respective parliaments. Maldives was part of Wu's official goodwill visits to Namibia, Angola, and South Africa. This visit was preceded by a five day visit of Ibrahim Hussein Zaki, a leader of Maldivian Democratic Party and special envoy of the President to China in the second week of May (9-13). Zaki met Li Jinhua, vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

During the visit Wu met his Maldivian counterpart, Abdullah Shahid, speaker of Maldivian People's Majlis and praised the development of democracy in Maldives under President Nasheed's leadership. Wu noted that Maldives, especially its President were playing an increasingly important role at the international level. Wu also suggested that in order to infuse a new spirit in the bilateral relations, the two parliaments can interact and share views and experience of successful national construction. Shahid stated that the economic growth of China is an inspiration for Maldives and the Maldivian people treasure friendship with China. Shahid also expressed commitment to foster cooperation between the People's Majlis and the NPC.

China and Maldives will celebrate 40 years of bilateral relations in 2012. In that context, Wu showed satisfaction over development of ties between the two countries, noting that, "The relationship between us has developed into becoming a model for the one between big and small nations". On this occasion, Wu Bangguao made important announcements. The Chairman promulgated opening of an embassy in the country and stated that the Chinese aid to Maldives would be doubled to US\$ 15.4 million. Wu also announced direct flights to Maldives and that China would offer 11 scholarships to Maldivian students in 2011 and 2013.

Wu also met Maldivian President Mohammed Nasheed and an agreement on economic and technical cooperation was signed between them. Wu said that China sees great potential in tourism, fisheries and infrastructure in Maldives, wherein the two countries can cooperate. The Chairman also expressed reciprocal action from Maldives in order to take collaboration to higher levels. Maldivian President Nasheed drawing from Wu, reiterated the willingness for mutual cooperation in the field of tourism, infrastructure and development. Both agreed on working closely to safeguard interests of developing countries.

In 1972 Maldives was the last South Asian country to establish formal relations with China. Their engagement was chiefly economic and of low profile in nature. It was only in 1990s that bilateral visits at high level were more frequent. This period also witnessed emerging defence cooperation between the two countries. The strategic location of Maldives is crucial for China, in such that cordial relations with the island state of Maldives could provide Chinese merchant ships a safe passage and access to sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.

The bilateral trade in 2010 was \$64 million, witnessed rise by 56% , than the previous year , owing to large number of Chinese tourists. China is actively encouraging its successful domestic companies to contribute to infrastructure building in the island state, by means of offering preferential loans. Ahead of Wu Bangguao's visit, Maldivian Economic Development Minister Mahmood Razee, in an interview with a Chinese newspaper stated, "China-Maldives economic engagement is getting stronger and deeper". He also mentioned his government's determination to launch public-private partnership in education, real estate, health and development of

commercial ports. Economic engagement could be advantageous for China in terms of gaining a new market in Maldives; likewise Chinese investments will be crucial for a Maldives trying to recover its economy. As of now the bilateral trade is heavily in favour of China.

Maldives can provide a strategic and political foothold to China in combating piracy at multilateral forums. Maldives and China have common concerns like maritime security and climate change, and in that regard both countries may benefit from mutual support. More importantly, a rising China would seek support in multilateral forums inter-alia on issues of one China policy and human rights, which appears to be the motivating factor behind broad-basing relations with Maldives.

According to President Nasheed, , the Chinese interest in the Maldives pivot on “collaboration on climate change”. However, according to a website it has been argued that in the context of US rejection of the Kyoto protocol; China’s support to Maldives in climate change can be intensified as anti-America campaign.

President Nasheed refuted the claim that Maldives had to balance its relationship with China with its diplomatic ties with India. He noted, “I don’t think we have to walk tight-rope. We are firstly SAARC member country and China’s friendship is about broader global interest rather than regional.” The statements implies Maldives’ commitment and priority to the region while giving due importance to matters of global concerns, notably climate change. Maldives can be expected to find China’s support crucial at global forums on climate change.

There have been uncorroborated reports in India of Chinese having established a base at Marao Island near Male in 2001. This claim however has been denied by Chinese and Maldivian officials. If the above claims are to be believed, then Chinese engagement in Maldives could be much more ambitious in the long term.

*\*Amruta Karambelkar, Research Interns, at Indian Council of World Affairs ,New Delhi 110001*

*22 June 2011*