

## CHANGING DYNAMICS OF INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN SECURITY

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### Abstract

*As an interstate bilateral amity, the nature of the diplomatic relations between the South Asian giant India and the small island nation of the Maldives has a profound bearing on the regional security dynamics in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region dynamics. This paper draws a study of the shifting characteristics of the Indo-Maldivian relationship and how they alter Indian security, especially on the changes of political leadership within the Maldives and influence by third players such as China. The Maldives is located on the Indian Ocean strategic sea lanes, thereby its political stability and alignment is important to India by extension. Thus, the dynamics of the bilateral relation over the years were shaped by various issues such as the economic partnership, defense cooperation, and mutual strategic concerns periodically calibrated, due to the internal political situation in the Maldives and regarding the country's shift of foreign policy affiliations. As such, using a qualitative examination of diplomatic diplomacy, security cooperation, and the nature of the strategic environment of the study, the current state of India-Maldives Relations is intended to reveal and theoretically advance the future possible tendencies that can define regional stability. The intended goal of the findings is to present a balanced view of the strategic implications of changes in these relations on India's strategic configuration and security concerns in the IOR.*

**Keywords:** India-Maldives Relations, Regional Security, Political Stability, Economic Partnership, Defense Cooperation, Strategic Concerns, Foreign Policy, Bilateral Relations

### Introduction

Thus, the relationship between India and the Maldives is multifaceted and vibrant, which plays a crucial role in ensuring stability in the IOR. This paper looks at the shifts like the bilateral relations between the two countries and evaluates the effects on the security of India. Being located in the southern interface of the Indian Ocean, the position of the Maldives makes it very crucial in the realization of the security aspects of the Indian ocean and dominating the region. The history of America-Egypt relations for this analysis is founded in cooperation especially in the security field including maritime security cooperation, condemnation of terrorism and economic partnership in development. In the past few years, the political situation of the Maldives was more unpredictable affecting the foreign policy mainly, the flip-flopping relationship with China. These factors have thrown India into a state of strategic shift and diplomatic realignment as far as the Maldives is concerned. In the context of the proposed historical and contemporary analysis of the complex India-Maldives relations, the aims and objectives of this paper are given in this introduction. It aims at

offering a better understanding of these interactions as a reaction to internal and external pressures, and prospectus for regional security. Therefore, by including the analysis of the general geopolitical setting when underlining these relations this paper wants to contribute to the increased degree of understanding of the potentialities and obstacles that India faces when possessing control over the Indian Ocean space in the context of the changing affiliation landscape.

### **The objective of the papers**

1. Analyze the Shifting Characteristics of Indo-Maldivian Relations
2. Evaluate the Impact of External Influences on India-Maldives Relations
3. Investigate the Strategic and Security Implications for India
4. Propose Recommendations for Future Diplomatic Strategies

### **India-Maldivian Relation**

India and Maldives are the two countries that are in each other's neighborhood through separating a maritime border. Thus, the protection and economic support of the Maldives is partially in the Indian interest. Recent events that have led to misunderstanding between the two countries have tried to mar the existing relations between the two nations. The current President of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu, has recently launched what is known as the 'India-Out' campaign and, at the same time, has been gradually turning to China. There has also been recent incidents where the Maldivian ministers have recently offended the Indians; they have insulted the Lakshadweep islands of India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which added to the tensions. Depending on projects, India's presence in the Maldives covers large scale structures such as the Greater Malé Project, next only to \$500 million project. The objective of this project is to interconnect the capital city with three neighboring islands by a 6.74-kilometer sea bridge. Both countries are also the member of the Commonwealth of Nations and work as republic within this large organization. Maldives is an island country located in the Indian Ocean, specifically, to the south of the Indian peninsula's Lakshadweep Islands. The formal diplomatic relations between the two nations were established in 1966 after the Maldives got its independence from the British rule and India was the first few countries to recognize the Maldives. Since then the Maldivian – Indian relations have grown strategic, military economic and cultural. India has always stood behind the Maldives in terms of policy of non-interference into regional conflicts considering this relationship as constructive for the region. On the other hand, the Maldives considers their partnership with India not only as essential but also as a recognisable counterweight to Sri Lanka, a country that is comparatively close geographically and is the Maldives' main trading partner. (Malone, 2012)

### **Bilateral Treaties and Strategic Partnership**

#### **1976 Maritime Treaty**

In December 1976, India and the Maldives signed a key maritime boundary demarcation agreement setting out accepted maritime boundaries. In this treaty, claims were made to place

Minicoy Island under territorial waters of India. The decision to draw the maritime boundary between the India and the Maldives is official and benign. But an incident in 1982 diplomatically strained the relation between two countries when Abdulla Hameed, the brother of the President Moomoon Abdul Gayoom has make a speech that was unfolded as Indian acquired the Minicoy Island. The Maldivian government was quick to explain that the speech meant speaker wired links the Maldives and Minicoy not territorial sovereignty. (Raj, 2015)

### **1988 Comprehensive Trade Agreement**

There was a combined USA Trade and Commerce Agreement between India and the Maldives signed in 1981 in order to strengthen the bearings of trade relations between both countries. They are both members of the SAARC, the SEAUU, and are part of the SAFTA agreement as well. It means that they have been able to have regular, even though at high level, contacts and consultations at the regional level deepening their economic and political cooperation. (Pubby, 2009)

### **Commercial Relations**

The bond between India and the Maldives were considerably improved after the involvement of India in operation Cactus. After that, India has given significant economic assistance and became engaged in numerous bilateral initiatives to enhance the Maldives' physical infrastructure, health delivery system, communications, and manpower. Some of the commendable achievements include opening of Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital in Malé, development of telecommunications and aviation links to and setting up of more scholarships for Maldivians students. India-Maldives trade in 2006 exporting goods to Maldives stood ₹384 crore whereas imports from Maldives were to the tune of ₹6 crore. Moreover, the State Bank of India has would planned to invest over half billion dollar to help the Maldives for a better economic growth. Both nations have also declared intends for compiling further investment in improving the fisheries segment and increasing the capacity of tuna processing, in order to prove the commitment of furthering the economic relations in both nations. (Haidar, 2015)

### **1988 Maldives Coup d'État Attempt**

1988 coup d'état attempt in the Maldives was by a local businessman Abdullah Luthufi; he hired Tamil armed mercenaries from the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam from Sri Lanka. The mercenaries within no time managed to occupy strategic installations across the capital, offices, officially known as the airport, and the media houses. It also provoked the Indian Armed Forces into Operation Cactus where the Indian paratroopers captured the airfield in a quick operation and moved to Malé to rescue Gayoom, the President of Maldives. The drastic measure brought back the government, however, before the day ended. Certain mercenaries tried to flee to Sri Lanka, but they were apprehended by the Indian Navy and arrested. Said conflict led to the deaths of 19 people, many of them mercenaries and two hostages. (Lintner, 2019)

## **2014 Malé Water Shortage Crisis**

On December 4, 2014, Malé faced a severe drinking water crisis due to the failure of the island's sole water treatment plant. In response, the Maldives requested immediate assistance from India. India deployed heavy-lift transport aircraft, including the C-17 Globemaster III and Il-76, to airlift bottled water. Additionally, Indian Navy ships equipped with desalination plants, such as INS Sukanya and INS Deepak, were sent to produce fresh water on-site. The rapid and effective response from India was highly praised by the Maldivian population and government, with the Vice-President publicly thanking the Indian ambassador.

## **2011–2015 Maldives Political Crisis**

The political landscape in Maldives was turbulent from 2011 to 2015, marked by the arrest of Mohammed Nasheed, the nation's first democratically elected president, on terrorism charges in February 2015. Both India and the United States voiced concerns over the handling of Nasheed's arrest. Initially, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi planned a visit to the Maldives as part of a regional tour, but he subsequently excluded Maldives from his itinerary in response to the political situation. (Ahmed, 2017)

## **2020 COVID-19 Crisis**

In the year 2020 when the whole world was fighting the pandemic COVID-19, India offered enormous assistance to the Maldives. This comprised a \$150 million currency swap to for softening the effects of COVID-19 on the economy. We have also come to know that at the instance of the Maldivian government the Indian Air Force had to airlift 6. 2 tones of essential medicines and hospital supplies under the operation Sanjeevani Along with this, India also sent a medical team with essential medicines moreover food grains and edibles were supplied in spite of the difficulties involved due to Corona virus lockdown worldwide India assured its support for Maldives in this critical situation. (Gupta, 2019)

## **Recent controversy between India and Maldiv**

On January 4th, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said some things about the beautiful beaches of Lakshadweep thus provoking a diplomatic incident with the heavily beach tourist dependent Maldives. To the above, three Maldivian junior ministers offering condemnations against the Indian Prime Minister leading to calls on the Indian tweple to boycott Maldivian tourism. While this might look like a minor event on the social media, this event serves to illustrate the escalating relations between India and the Maldives since the election of Mohamed Muizzu as the President of the Maldives. Muizzu has demanded the pulling out of Indian forces and the desire for foreign policy that is slightly less aligned with India while increasing ties with China. Since Muizzu came into the Presidency, Nilanthi Samaranyake, the visiting expert of US Institute of Peace, presents the consequences for Maldives-India nexus, Sino-Indian and US engagements contained in this dispute. This tension could also have a picture on the economy if the Indian tourists decided to boycott the Maldives because of the bad mouth that the ministers have been using on India. India was the Maldives' largest source of tourists in 2023; however, Indian tourists can go on a holiday to

many other places. What the ministers said is unfitting and unbecoming of ministers let alone government officials, even more so given they said these things that makes Maldives so vulnerable economically for political gain as the island's source of foreign exchange and to service debts largely depends on tourism. There could also be negative implications for India since most flight connecting India to the Maldives are provided by the Indian carriers. The end to this diplomatic conflict mainly depends on the actions of the officials of the two countries. To negate such problems during the five-year term of President Mohamed Muizzu, the leaders of both nations must work amicably and find an early solution to the problem. **(Ahmed M. , 1988)**

Still, the Indian government has always aimed at keeping good relations with the Maldives through its diplomacy strategy known as 'Neighborhood First'. However, the extent to which this policy has been carried out by the new Maldivian government from India is still in doubt. The ex-president, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, was an advocate of an "India first" policy to strategy relations in the Maldives. Nevertheless, the public has chosen a representative of a different party that aims at increasing the differentiation of the country's foreign policy and boosting its security sovereignty. While Muizzu has reiterated that he wants to have a favourable and good friendly relations with India, his electoral commitments have seen the end of Maldives aerial security agreement with India. He has challenged the Maldivian defense forces also to increase their capacity, as he has unilaterally cancelled India's hydrography security cooperation agreement with Maldives which was expiring in June. These changes reflect a long term evolution of the Maldives' defense policy in the last fifteen years or so. Some might regard such a change as a manifestation of a full switch to China; however, it might be worth categorizing this move as resulting from strategic competition, the pursuit of more partners, and nationalism. This might at some point compel the Maldives to approach India for a new security assistance owing to its location within the Indian ocean. Muizzu has expressed his desire that all countries including India must stand for the Maldives' defense requirement. In the same regard, the "India Out" campaign and slogans have been unhelpful for New Delhi, but Male's quest for increased autonomy is relevant to India's diversified foreign and defense policies. Such a changing dynamic could have possibly provided New Delhi the scope to prove its flexibility in diplomacy and security cooperation under 'Neighborhood First' and 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' policies with a new political regime in a smaller South Asian neighboring country. But the interaction, though, has not been so frequent between the Indian officials and Muizzu after the post-election. First, Kiren Rijiju Minister of Earth Sciences attended in November Muizzu's inauguration compared to Prime Minister Narendra Modi who attended Solih's inauguration in 2018. While informally Muizzu said that his first official foreign visit would be to the usual destination that conventionally a President of this country, no such arrangement has yet been made. However, his first state visits were to Turkey and China. Luckily, Modi and Muizzu had a meeting at the COP 28 summit in UAE early December. They formed a working group at the secretary-level to address the fields of bilateral relations and development cooperation as well as removal of the Indian security personnel from the

Maldives by March 15, prior to the parliamentary polls in which the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party holds dominance. The nature and frequency of the interactions that Muizzu will have during his visit to India will be an effective way of indicating the nature of the future relations and India's capacity in practicing its Neighborhood First policy to support higher strategic interests. (Batcher, 2004)

### **Civil Society Perception of India in the Maldives**

Overall for the common people in the Maldives the perception about India and the Indians is that of friendly neighbours in economic, social and political aspects of life. But it is not so perceived across the over all Maldivian society; there are segments in Maldivian society that have exhibited extreme anti-India impassioned sentiment symbolised by the 'India Out' movement. The Indian High Commission has described this campaign as 'motivated, malicious and going personal'. However, there is much goodwill and cultural connection between the two countries. The Maldives enjoys the status of one of India's neighbors in the Indian Ocean region, which is critically important for New Delhi. Indian Maldivian bilateral relations have exhibited pro-activeness especially in the area of developing and improving the defense and security operational capabilities of the Maldives. Other combined activities have been military drills, capacity building, construction of facilities, and transfers of equipment aimed at illustrating India as a regional security power. Furthermore, there continues to be an ongoing assessment of the diplomacy management with the regard to the fundamental island countries in the South Indian Ocean securing access as well as power. (Bisht, 2015)

### **2024 India–Maldives Diplomatic Row**

As for the bilateral relations between India and the Maldives, tensions erupted in January 2024 when Maldivian officials negatively referenced Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as racially and criticised India as being racist in general. Such comments have not only influenced diplomatic relations, but also people's attitudes for which there are tendencies to boycott Maldivian vacations in India. The tension reached to such an extent that some of the Bollywood celebrities started criticizing the Maldivian government. This period of tension in the relations came to a tragic end when an opportunity to evacuate a boy for a heart operation by an air ambulance from India was turned down due to the poor relations between the two countries. Large diplomatic interaction was observed on 09/05/2024, when external affairs minister of India S. Jaishankar met his Maldivian counterpart Zameer. At this meeting, the spokesman from India's Ministry of External Affairs, Randhir Jaiswal acknowledged talks of the hiring of 'competent Indian technical personnel' for the replacement of Indian forces. This act must continue the function of Indian aviation facilities in the Maldives, which is important for evacuation, humanitarian, and disaster relief tasks, suggesting efforts to stabilize and probably enhance the bilateral relationship in the future. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006)

## **Beyond Beaches: A Deep Dive into India-Maldives Relations**

India is a neighbour and a historical ally of the Maldives and due to close proximity and historical ties economic and cultural relations between the two countries have blossomed over the years. Nevertheless, this bond has been put on the spot regarding political and social instability coupled with the viral social media feud that occurred between the two countries' diplomats. This event pertained to unkind words spoken by Maldivian authorities about the Indian Prime Minister and his positive comments on the Indian chain of islands – Lakshadweep, which was construed as a threat to the appeal of the Maldives as a tourist destination. (Shamim, 2018)

### **Strategic and Security Dimensions**

Geopolitically, the Maldives act as a sentinel on some of the lanes of communication that are essential for world commerce and oil transport. Having noticed this, India has provided a very large input in terms of defense cooperation in the form of multinational exercise, training of local forces, and bilateral frameworks that sought to bolster the maritime security in the Maldives. Such measures testify to India's strategic position in the South Asian region as the security guarantor. (Singh, 2015)

### **Economic Interactions and Assistance**

Thus, economically, India has been one of the most important partners of the Maldives. Apart from tourism, the cooperation encompasses serious investments of the Indian money in boost up of the infrastructures, health sectors and disaster responses in the Maldives. Some examples of such support are India's quick intervention during the water crisis which occurred in Malé in 2014, and Medical aid that India is providing during COVID-19 pandemic crisis including currency swap which strengthens the Maldivian economy. (Gurjar, 2018)

### **India-Maldives Diplomatic Dispute: Latest Developments**

India and the Maldives have immediately fallen into a diplomatic dispute as three ministers of Maldives, in January 2024, tweeted rude comments on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this after Mr. Modi shared pictures of his visit to Lakshadweep. This event created a 'Boycott Maldives' trend in the social media and many Indian people including celebrities urged the fellow countrymen to avoid visiting Maldives and instead opt for domestic tourists' destinations such as Lakshadweep. Though Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's government subsequently suspended the three ministers and expressed its disassociation from their statements, the adverse effect was already in the process of occurring particularly reflected by the cancellation of reservation and hotel booking to the Maldives by large numbers of Indian tourists. This development is posing some threats to the growth of the Maldivian economy since it mostly depended on tourism. President Muizzu is regarded as anti-India and pro-China as he came into power on the campaign, which was aptly named 'India Out', that condemned the presence of Indian troops in the Maldives. Contrary to

expectations, during his presidency Muizzu decided to pay his first official visits to the countries of the far east including China and Turkey, not India. This change of emphasis could be the beginning of a restructuring of the diplomatic relationships of the Maldivian state and points to conflicts of geopolitics in the Indian Ocean.

### **Diplomatic and Cultural Ties**

In diplomatic terms the two countries have had for most of the time friendly relations with regular visits between the heads of state/ government and Multilateral Forums such as the United Nations and the common wealth. As a result of the cultural relations that were initially generated through commonalities in South Asian culture even during strained relations common values are understood making it easier to seek common grounds.

### **The Road Ahead**

The recent incident that came up into light on the social media platform obviously matters; but I guess in the trajectory of India-Maldives relationship, this must be something akin to a blip. A win-win relationship between the United States of America and Nigeria with due regard to interests both nations will undeniably benefit and provide a way forward for both to tackle general African issues. In the future, diplomatic relations should continue and the countries must continue negotiations avoiding conflicts that are for the short-term interest. This case shows that the countries of the modern world are interconnected economically, politically and militarily, and the relations thus developed get intertwined with the information warfare conducted by the countries on social media. **(Hornat, 2019)Conclusion**

### **Conclusion**

The nature of the bilateral relation that exist between both countries is quite complex and nuanced and plays a crucial role the stability of the region in South Asia and the IOI. Thus, this relationship has changed over the years based on such factors as internal change in political environment in the Maldives, external contributing factors and changing strategies. Some of the latest issues, the so-called "India-Out" campaign and Maldives' rapprochement with China under the presidency of Mohamed Muizzu only added further vagueness to this equation.

### **Impact on India-Maldives Political and Defense Relations**

The relations between India and Maldives in political aspect are very volatile and have marked shifts with the change of government in Maldives. The "India-Out" campaign and the Maldives continuous move towards China have taken the toll on diplomatic relations. The government under President Muizzu has avoided India's cooperation and engaged in political campaigns against the Indian military presence and for sovereignty in defence affairs. This change affects not only the strong historical relationship but also the bilateral plans for defense, protection of the sea, and general cooperation in strategic matters. India's emergency



aid has been prompt and large-scale – be it the 1988 coup attempt, the 2014 water crisis in Malé, or the COVID-19 pandemic. But these attempts are no longer threatened by the shift in the Maldives' allegiance to China, which calls for a reconsideration of India's diplomatic thought process.

### **Effect on India's Defense and Strategic Policies in the Indian Ocean Region**

The above mentioned points show that Maldives plays an important role in Indian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. The Maldives location that strategically places the country on important sea lanes is an important partner on matters pertaining to sea security and balance in the region. The recent change of tide in the new Maldivian foreign policy, wherein it shifted towards China from India, is a blow to India's hegemony in the region. Hence, India needs to step up on defense as well as strategy to contain China's influence. This includes improving the naval power, cementing ties with other actors in the region, and becoming more active in multilateral formations including IORA and the Quad which includes India, Australia, Japan, and the United States.

### **Effect on India's Maritime and National Security**

The Maldives sits right in the middle and is effectively a cornerstone in India's maritime security architecture. Chinese growing influence in the Maldives is seeking to alter the existing power dynamics in the Indian Ocean region and is a direct security threat to India. The setting up of Chinese-built infrastructure and possible military facilities in the Maldives may constrain India's manoeuvre and observation capacities in the Indian Ocean area. To avoid these risks India needs to improve the maritime situational awareness and acquire modern surveillance systems and increase naval presence. Further, the enhancement of security cooperation with other Indian Ocean coastal countries will equally be paramount in enhancing maritime security.

### **Impact on India's Strategy to Counter China in the Indian Ocean Region**

China's increasing interest in the Maldives is a part of China's grand strategy to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean region of which the Indian Maldives act as a strategic rival to India. To offset this, what is required in India is a pluralism approach. It appears here that diplomacy should remain a primary instrument; yet, India also needs to maintain close political and economic relationships with the Maldives, focusing on the positive aspects of the interaction. Apart from the provision of assistance in such sectors the military cooperation and training exercises should be intensified to strengthen the strategic partnership. Besides, more effort should be made to direct more development aids to increase capacities of the infrastructure and economy of the Maldives in order to avoid its over-reliance on China's funding assistance. In conclusion, it can be stated that the India-Maldives relations are experiencing gradual transformation and therefore, requires proper and strategic mechanism from the India side. Improving relations, building up security, and it is stipulated by the

necessity to challenge the Chinese impact in the region to guarantee the Indian's interests' safety and stability in the region. Diplomatic, military, as well as economic challenges are related to the strategic goals and objectives that may help India to strengthen its positions and become the key state of the Indian Ocean region.

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