

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MALDIVES TO INDIA

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The Republic of the Maldives, which is located in the Indian Ocean, is an archipelago comprising approximately 1,200 islands with a geographical spread of over 90,000 sq.km. Incorporating some 26 atolls, the Maldives is one of the world's most geographically dispersed countries, and is a 99 per cent water-nation.¹ However, with a total land mass of only 298 square kilometres (sq km), it is also the smallest country in Asia and is categorised as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS). Malé, the capital, is located within the Malé atoll, which itself is roughly in the centre of the archipelago (Figure 1 refers). Interestingly, with an average elevation of 1.5 metres (4 feet 11 inches), Maldives is the lowest-lying country on the planet. With the highest elevation being just 2.3 metres (7 feet 7 inches) above sea level, the archipelago has the world's lowest naturally-occurring 'highest-point'! In view of these natural traits, the existential threats from environmental catastrophes, such as *tsunamis* and sea-level rise, loom large over the Maldives.²



Figure 1: The Republic of Maldives

¹ “About Maldives”, High Commission of Maldives, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, <https://maldives.org.my/about-maldives>

² Ritika V Kapoor, “Climate Change Vulnerabilities of the Maldives: Implications for India”, *National Maritime Foundation*, 03 April 2020, <https://maritimeindia.org/climate-change-vulnerabilities-of-the-maldives-implications-for-india/>

Despite its small size, the Maldives is currently being wooed by a number of developed and developing countries. China, for instance, in pursuit of its own geo-economic goals, views it as one of the key components of its 'Belt and Road' Initiative (BRI),³ and is actively establishing its presence in this strategically positioned island-state by involving itself in infrastructure projects in the archipelago. China's BRI, involving the Maldives amongst other IOR island- and littoral-States, has certainly widened the current Chinese sphere of influence within this strategically-critical oceanic expanse. As such, these activities have the potential to adversely impact India's own interests, occurring, as they do in her very backyard, i.e., the Indian Ocean.

In an effort to counter China's influence and to bolster its own regional standing, India has stepped-up its engagement of the Maldives, as also other such strategically-located SIDS, through a variety of interventions based upon cultural, religious, economic and political facets of New Delhi's foreign policy.

This article seeks to discuss the importance of SIDS for India, with special reference to the Maldives, by highlighting five key aspects relating to India's concerns regarding the growing China-led involvement in the island nation.

Strategic Importance of the Geographic Location of the Maldives with respect to Key International Shipping Lanes (ISLs)

The Indian Ocean is a key highway for global trade and energy flows.⁴ The Maldives is geographically positioned like a 'toll gate' between the western Indian Ocean chokepoints of the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Hormuz on the one hand, and the eastern Indian Ocean chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca on the other. Thus, while the ISLs in the vicinity of the Maldives have broad strategic significance for global maritime trade, they are of particular importance to India. Fifty per cent of India's external trade and eighty per cent of its energy imports transit these ISLs.⁵ It is obvious, therefore, that any significant Chinese presence in this region has the potential to impede trade movement that is vital to India's economic interests, and such a possibility must be guarded against.

³ W Cong, "China-Maldives 'Project of the Century' Bridge Opens, Reflects China's BRI Vision", *Global Times*, 31 August 2018, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1117840.shtml

⁴ E Albert, "Competition in the Indian Ocean", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/background/competition-indian-ocean>

⁵ AK Singh, "What is the Geostrategic Importance of Maldives to India", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, 03 June 2019, <https://idsa.in/askanexpert/what-is-the-geo-strategic-importance-of-maldives>

Chinese Economic Presence in the Maldives

The growing Chinese influence in the Maldives, consequent upon the planned- or ongoing execution of a large number of Beijing-led investment projects, is a major concern for India. In 2018, the GDP of the Maldives was in the range of US\$ 5.3 billion. Currently, the island state owes US\$ 3.4 billion in the form of debt to China. This represents 70% of Maldives' total external aid. This alarming level implies that, 2020 onwards, 15% of Malé's budget will have to be spent on paying back this debt.⁶ This is a situation similar to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka involving China's interest in Hambantota Port, located on the southern coast of Sri Lanka.⁷ The former Maldivian President, Abdulla Yameen, had allegedly used massive amounts of Chinese capital to finance infrastructure projects in the island nation. One such project was that of a hospital in Malé that had run up a cost of US\$ 140 million, much more than a rival offer of US\$ 54 million.⁸ However, the growing dependence on China was not appreciated by the Maldivian electorate, and, amongst other factors, this resulted in Yameen's political defeat in the 2019 parliamentary elections. The current incumbent, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, having won a landslide victory, is perceived to be an outright proponent of India's interests in the region and sceptical of China's intentions. While India's Ministry of External Affairs naturally welcomed Solih's victory,⁹ the lure of cheap and easy money that can be sourced from China is still a potential threat to the sovereignty of the archipelago.¹⁰

⁶ S Shekhar, "China's Debt Trap Diplomacy Exposed, Ex-Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed says 'Cost of Projects Very High'", *Times Now*, 04 July 2019, <https://www.timesnownews.com/international/article/china-s-debt-trap-diplomacy-exposed-ex-maldives-president-mohamed-nasheed-says-cost-of-projects-very-high/448679>

7

'Unfortunately, the Maldives is not the only Asian nation to fall prey to President Xi's ambitious infrastructure project. The 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka awarded to China serves as just another example of China's "debt-trap diplomacy"', B Ribenboim, "How China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy Crumbled The Maldivian Economy", *Hudson Institute South Asia Program*, 09 July 2019, www.southasiaathudson.org/blog/2019/7/9/chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy-in-the-maldives

8

"Maldives Says China is Building Projects at Inflated Prices", *The Straits Times*, 27 November 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/maldives-says-china-is-building-projects-at-inflated-prices>

9

Indian Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, complemented Mohamed Solih on the victory of the Maldivian Democratic Party in the 2019 Parliamentary elections. Modi welcomed the successful completion of the elections which had marked consolidation of democracy and strengthened the democratic institutions in the island nation. "Telephone Calls of PM after Parliamentary Elections in Maldives", Ministry of External Affairs Media Center, 08 April 2019, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31212/Telephone+Calls+of+PM+after+Parliamentary+elections+in+Maldives+April+08+2019>

10

M Ives, "Maldives Election Results Empower a Critic of China", *The New York Times*, 08 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/world/asia/maldives-election-ibrahim-solih.html>

Presence of Chinese Ships in the Maldives

On 27 August 2017, three Chinese naval ships — the *Chang Chun*, the *Jing Zhou*, and, the *Chao Hu* — were observed berthed alongside in the commercial harbour of Malé.¹¹ According to Mr Peter Jennings, Executive Director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, “*Sending warships to operate off the Maldives is a new and concerning development, because it shows that China is exercising influence over a small state more usually within India’s strategic view.*”¹² Subsequently, in February 2018, when the Maldives faced a turbulent political crisis,¹³ Chinese warships, including an amphibious vessel, were deployed just off the eastern fringes of the Indian Ocean. Strategic analysts in Australia have flagged this as marking a significant shift in regional power, and opined that “*The Chinese are there to keep India away from Beijing’s interests in the strife-torn Maldives.*”¹⁴ Jennings had gone on to describe New Delhi’s perception of such Chinese activities as worrisome. Indeed, such events have served to intensify the regional strategic competition and increase the historical mistrust that pervades Sino-Indian relations. India, therefore, cannot afford to be benignly neglectful of this critically important maritime neighbour that is located mere 700 kilometres away, and must necessarily be vigilant and keep a careful watch on any and all Chinese attempts to cozy-up to the Maldives. India must also undertake serious efforts to reinvigorate its own ties with the Maldives.¹⁵

India’s Role as a Net Provider of Regional Security

As the preeminent South Asian resident maritime power, India has a responsibility to address not only its own security concerns but also those of other countries in its maritime neighbourhood.¹⁶ In March of 2015, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had clearly enunciated India’s intention to be a be

¹¹ S Anees, “Three Chinese Naval Ships Arrive in Maldives”, *MV Raajje*, 27 August 2017, <https://raajje.mv/16679>

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J Seidel, “Maldives Crisis: China Sends a Naval Task Force to Muscle India, Australia Out of Power Game”, *News.com.au*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/maldives-crisis-china-sends-a-naval-task-force-to-muscle-india-australia-out-of-power-game/news-story/925e7d73f08659451b060ce3d154b78f>

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N Qayum, “The Crisis in the Maldives, Explained”, *The Washington Post*, 12 February 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/12/how-is-trade-with-china-related-to-the-state-of-emergency-in-maldives-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>

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Anees, “Chinese Ships in Maldives”

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RV Kapoor, “Reinvigorating India-Maldives Maritime Cooperation Amidst the Growing Sino-Indo Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean Region”, *National Maritime Foundation*, 13 September 2019, <https://maritimeindia.org/reinvigorating-india-maldives-maritime-cooperation-amidst-the-growing-sino-indo-strategic-competition-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

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On 18 October 2017, the then Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson was quoted as saying that, “The US and India should be partners to further a free and open Indo-Pacific because India has been rising as a responsible power, upholding the rule of law and freedom of navigation, while China has not.” Ayres, A., “Tillerson on India: Partners in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.cfr.orf/blog/tillerson-india-partners-free-and-open-indo-pacific>

“... a net provider of maritime security in our immediate neighbourhood **and beyond**.”¹⁷. Two years later, during his 2017 visit to Mauritius, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pronounced India’s vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).¹⁸ With the India and the Maldives being equally interested stakeholders in terms of the development and stability of the region, Solih and Modi have agreed to work together to maintain peace and security in the Indian Ocean Region.¹⁹

Towards this end, India has provided tangible manifestation of its commitment to be a net provider of security in the region. In the third week of February of 2016, India despatched its most potent warship – the aircraft carrier, INS *Vikramaditya*, accompanied by a modern, indigenously-constructed guided-missile destroyer, INS *Mysore*, and the Fleet Replenishment Tanker, INS *Deepak*. Officers and sailors of the Indian warships held a series of professional interactions with their counterparts from the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), thereby enhancing the already-close cooperation between the two maritime forces.²⁰ Additionally, in December of 2019, India gifted a ‘Made-in-India’ patrol vessel, the “*Kaamiyaab*” to the MNDF.²¹ The patrol vessel attracted widespread praise in the island nation and, in February 2020, the Maldives Defence Minister, Ms Mariya Didi, was reported to have requested for another vessel by India.²²

The Indian Diaspora in the Maldives

Resting upon thrust lines of religion, culture, language and ethnicity, India-Maldives relations have historically been close, cordial and multidimensional. In accordance with India’s ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’, New Delhi remains committed to the development of a stable, prosperous and peaceful

¹⁷ “PM’s speech at the Foundation Stone Laying Ceremony for the Indian National Defence University at Gurgaon”, *Press Information Bureau, Government of India (Prime Minister’s Office)* 23-May, 2013. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/mbErel.aspx?relid=96146>

¹⁸ “Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Commissioning of Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) Barracuda in Mauritius”, *Indian Ministry of External Affairs: Outgoing Visits*, 12 March 2015, <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?24912/Prime+Ministers+Remarks+at+the+Commissioning+of+Offshore+Patrol+Vessel+OPV+Barracuda+in+Mauritius+March+12+2015>

¹⁹ DR Chaudhury, “India & Maldives to Deepen Ties for Peace in Indian Ocean Region”, *The Economic Times*, 18 December 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-maldives-to-deepen-cooperation-for-indian-ocean-security/articleshow/67126717.cms?from=mdr>

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“Indian Warships Visit to Male, Maldives”, Indian Navy Website, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-warships-visit-male-maldives-0>

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DR Chaudhury, “India Gifts Patrol Vessel to Maldives as Net Security Provider of Region”, *The Economic Times*, 05 December 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-gifts-patrol-vessel-to-maldives-as-net-security-provider-of-region/articleshow/72376730.cms?from=mdr>

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S Sibal, “As Defence Ties Grow, Maldives Requests Another Vessel from India”, *WION*, 07 February 2020, <https://www.wionews.com/india/news-update-breaking-as-defence-ties-grow-Maldives-requests-another-vessel-from-India>

Maldives, whereas Malé's 'India-First Policy' ensures full support for deepening the multifaceted and mutually beneficial partnership between the two neighbours.²³ As of December 2016, there were around 25,000 Indian nationals, along with 108 Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), living in the Maldives.²⁴ As far as tourism is concerned, Indian tourists account for close to six per cent of the total Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) to the Maldives, annually. However, there is still quite some distance to go, as witness the fact that tourists from China comprise 14.7 per cent of the tourist population of the Maldives.²⁵

In an effort to provide increased connectivity between India and the Maldives, a passenger-cum-cargo ferry service, between the port of Kochi (located in the south-western Indian state of Kerala) and Malé, was launched during PM Modi's visit to the archipelago in June 2019.²⁶ This service will add to the existing air connectivity, which incorporates two-and-a-half-hour flights between Mumbai and Malé, and an hour-and-forty-minutes flight between Kochi and Malé.²⁷ Whether the ferry service will prove commercially viable and whether it will supplement the existing air-traffic or merely draw some of the existing number of tourists away from air-travel and to travel by sea, are matters that only time will prove. If seaborne travel between the two countries is to be attractive — especially for budget travellers — despite the much longer duration of each voyage (as compared to travel by air), both countries will have to supplement the sea-voyages by other attractions. Whale-spotting and coral-reef snorkelling and/or scuba-diving are options with clear potential, but need great commitment to environmental and ecological preservation on the part of both countries.

²³ "India-Maldives Joint Statement During the State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives", Indian Ministry of External Affairs Bilateral/Multilateral Documents, 08 June 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31418/IndiaMaldives+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+Visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Maldives>

²⁴ "Population of Overseas Indians", Indian Ministry of External Affairs, December 2016, <https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf/NRIs-and-PIOs.pdf>

²⁵ Z Ruiqing and T Lu, "China Will Remain an Important Development Partner of Maldives, Says Foreign Minister Shahid", *News In Asia*, 21 July 2019, <https://newsin.asia/china-will-remain-an-important-development-partner-of-maldives-says-foreign-minister-shahid-ian/>

²⁶ DR Chaudhury "India Gifts Patrol Vessel". (*Prime Minister Modi and President Solih emphasized the need to improve connectivity between India and Maldives through the establishment of enabling infrastructure, and directed their concerned officials to expeditiously working towards starting a regular passenger-cum-cargo ferry service between Kochi [India] and Kulbudhuffushi and Malé [Maldives]*).

²⁷ "Ferry Service to Ply the Route Between Kerala and Maldives", *Outlook Traveller*, 20 June 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/travelnews/story/69518/ferry-service-to-ply-the-route-between-kerala-and-maldives>

Conclusion

Maldives, as one of the most strategically located islands in the Indian Ocean, holds immense importance to India. If India is at all to be able to offer the region a more attractive set of maritime options, ranging from tourism to security, than are currently on offer from Beijing, the support of the Maldives is going to be crucial. The potential for both countries to work together on adaptive and mitigating measures against the adverse maritime-impacts of climate change is enormous. This potential must be realised through imaginative foreign-policy and maritime-security initiatives. While the recent 'India-First Policy' of the Maldives and India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' are intuitively complementary, the challenge lies in implementing these policies with cultural, geoeconomic, and geostrategic sensitivity. India's vision of SAGAR has tremendous possibilities in this regard. The India-Maldives partnership has seen its fair share of highs and lows. However, with India's firm support to the archipelago having recently been demonstrated by PM Modi's first official visit of his second term to Maldives in June of 2019, and, with a new Maldivian government under President Solih in power in Malé, the bilateral relationship seems firmly back on track.

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