

# A New Discourse on Indo-Maldives Relations: Challenges and Opportunities

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## Abstract

*The Indo-Maldives relationship is evolving with the recent election of President Dr Mohamed Muizzu which serves as a watershed moment in the bilateral relationship of both nations. With the victory of Dr Muizzu, this relationship is poised to enter a new phase, impacting the shared strategic, security, economic, and developmental interests of the two nations. Political changes in the Maldives, economic concerns, and India's assistance as a development partner are also addressed in the article. This article critically analyses the role of the new president in balancing relations with both India and China, with far-reaching consequences for the Indo-Pacific region.*

## Introduction

In the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, the Indo-Maldives relationship has been a story of enduring friendship and strategic relevance, nurtured by mutual respect, collaboration, and a persistent commitment to each other's interests. Despite the absence of common land borders. The Maldives, is a strategically positioned archipelagic republic and plays an important role in India's security interests due to its historical and cultural links.<sup>1</sup> With about 1,300 coral islands and sandbanks, the Republic of Maldives is in the western part of the Indian Ocean, provides an important link in the Indian Ocean's east-west maritime commerce route.<sup>2</sup> The Maldives is deceptively small, with only 202 permanently

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inhabited islands distributed across 180 sq mi, yet it has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) comprising over 3,25,000 mi<sup>2</sup> containing valuable Indian Ocean real estate.<sup>3</sup> With President Muizzu's recent win, a new chapter in the Indo-Maldives relationship is set to be written. The twenty-first century might bring a potential change in the political trajectory of the relationship between both nations, as Mohamed Muizzu, candidate of the Progressive National Congress (PNC) secured victory defeating the incumbent President Ibrahim Solih with 46 per cent of the votes.<sup>4</sup> His tenure is likely to have a substantial influence on the course of this long-standing cooperation, with both countries continuing to protect their common strategic, security, economic, and development interests. As we go deeper into the growing dynamics of this relationship, it is critical to comprehend the intricacies, challenges, and possibilities that the Indo-Maldives connection will present.

### **Strategic Importance of Maldives**

Given its strategic position, the Maldives has a geopolitical significance extending beyond its geographical size, making it a vital strategic player. India-Maldives ties have historically been distinguished by a great affinity, with India being one of the first nations to recognise Maldives following its independence in 1965.<sup>5</sup> Both countries have steadily improved their relationships, and the Maldives opened a full-fledged High Commission in New Delhi in 2004, demonstrating the importance of their bilateral relationship.<sup>6</sup> The Maldives is considered a natural ally of India in the Indian Ocean region, and both nations maintain regular high-level diplomatic interactions. In this environment, the Maldives' attitude has been impacted by its 'India First' strategy, which emphasises the importance of its connection with its larger and more powerful neighbour. India, too, recognises the Maldives' strategic importance, as the country is near its west coast and protects critical Sea Lanes of Communications which includes Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca, which are critical for global marine trade and India's own economic interests, transporting a large portion of India's external commerce and energy imports.<sup>7</sup> With the increasing maritime activity in the Indian Ocean; India has prioritised regional peace and security and hence the Indo-Maldives relationship becomes even more important. The Maldives plays a crucial role in India's goal of security and growth for all in the region, exhibiting the amplitude of their strategic partnership.<sup>8</sup>

However, this relationship has been laden with difficulties. The political environment in the Maldives has a consequential effect on its diplomatic connections with India. Moreover, the presence of significant countries such as China, India, and the US has driven the Maldives to carefully manage the difficult choices between promoting its economic and national security goals while safeguarding its sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> The ties between both the nations are notably influenced by factors such as the growth of Islamic extremism, and China's growing influence in the Maldives.<sup>10</sup> Over the last decade, there has been a significant upsurge in the number of Maldivians influenced by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and Pakistani-based madrasas and extremist groups.<sup>11</sup> Political instability and socio-economic uncertainty have been the principal causes of Islamic extremism in the Maldives, with some Maldivians participating in anti-India actions. Jihadist groups headquartered in Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba have exploited these weaknesses through philanthropic fronts, notably in the Southern Maldives, frequently under the idea of delivering help following the 2004 tsunami.<sup>12</sup> Developments in West Asia and the Af-Pak area have also influenced Maldivians to become radicalised.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, given China's expanded strategic footprint in neighbouring nations, the Maldives has come to play an essential role in China's 'String of Pearls' strategy.<sup>14</sup> With bolstered economic links between China and the Maldives, Beijing has been boosting its investment in the country as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>15</sup> Hence, with growing Islamic sentiments, China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean and the 'Pro-China' stance likely to be followed by Muizzu, the fundamental diplomatic issue for India lies in properly managing and overcoming these differences to preserve cordial ties.<sup>16</sup>

### **Maldives Political Transformation and Act of Balancing Two Asian Giants**

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom assumed power in 1978 and since then, the Maldivian political environment has changed dramatically, affecting India's bilateral relationship with the Maldives.<sup>17</sup> The Maldives' foreign policy towards India was uncertain during his tenure. Despite India's help in preserving Gayoom's rule from a coup attempt in 1988 through 'Operation Cactus', he never granted India any special privileges.<sup>18</sup> In his quest for international alliances, he looked to China, a rising global power with important strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Gayoom's

first visit to China was in 1984, and then in Sep 2006, further cementing the Maldives-China alliance.<sup>19</sup> China, infamous for making strategic advances in critical nations through infrastructure projects, was no exception in the Maldives. Chinese firms began joining the Maldives project-contracting market in 1985, with projects valued at USD 46.37 mn by the end of 2001.<sup>20</sup> These projects included the establishment of the Maldivian Foreign Ministry, a museum, housing developments and the expansion of road and drainage systems. The Sino-Maldives relationship deepened as China provided annual funds for its efforts in the Maldives, including sending aid following the 2004 tsunami. Though he maintained friendly relations with India, he also moved towards China, a rising power in the Indian Ocean.

The Maldives's first democratic government, led by Mohammed Nasheed emerged as a result of the first multi-party elections held in 2008, which was welcomed by the international community.<sup>21</sup> The emergence of multi-party democracy, however, has created uncertainty in the Sino-Maldivian bilateral relationship. Prior to the multi-party presidential elections in Oct 2008, Nasheed openly accused Gayoom of curling up to China.<sup>22</sup> Nasheed's government articulated the 'India first' approach, refraining from actions that would cause concern in India, and not providing a base for countries such as China to build strategic infrastructure. The Maldives permitted the installation of Indian radars on 26 atolls, combined naval drills with the Indian Navy, and training provided by India to the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF).<sup>23</sup> However, the strengthening of opposition forces in the 2009 Maldivian legislative elections, led by former Maldivian President Mohammed Gayoom, created tensions between the administration and the People's *Majlis* (Parliament House).<sup>24</sup> The opposition mobilised public opinion in disagreement with actions such as giving major infrastructural projects to major Indian contractors such as Grandhi Mallikarjuna Rao (GMR) without the *Majlis'* agreement.<sup>25</sup> The resignation of Nasheed in 2012 and the creation of a 'unity government' led by Vice President Mohammed Waheed did little to alleviate political tensions but this transition failed to bring political stability.<sup>26</sup>

During Waheed's presidency, Maldivian foreign policy orientation shifted again which was marked by an anti-India sentiment and a pro-China stance. Even though India was relatively

swift in recognising Waheed's government, he developed closer ties with China and cancelled the GMR contract which strained bilateral India-Maldives relations. In response, India froze aid to the politically unstable Maldives.<sup>27</sup> The decision to terminate the contract was not solely a result of domestic politics but was also influenced by external factors, particularly China's growing presence.<sup>28</sup> Waheed adopted a confrontational attitude towards India, even challenging foreign powers to stay out of Maldivian affairs. In the context of this shifting landscape, India had to be cautious in its role as an intermediary in the Maldivian presidential elections. It tried to maintain a pro-active approach but ultimately allowed the internal process to address the issues arising from the transfer of power to Waheed, widely appreciated by the United States (US) and Sri Lanka.<sup>29</sup> Despite the hostile political environment, India did not proactively manage the situation but rather allowed the internal processes to resolve the issues.

In Nov 2013, through an extensive electoral process Abdulla Yameen ultimately became the president and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) dominated the parliament.<sup>30</sup> Yameen's campaign emphasised his commitment to safeguarding Sunni Islam.<sup>31</sup> The Maldives' ties with China became stronger during Yameen's leadership. The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in Sep 2014 was a turning point in their bilateral relationship.<sup>32</sup> Xi sought Maldivian assistance for his contemporary maritime 'Silk Road' project, especially for a maritime route between China and Europe via West Africa.<sup>33</sup> Both countries signed nine agreements concerned with expanding the Maldives' international airport, a power plant project, road building, and the construction of a bridge between Malé and Hulhule.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the Maldives agreed to support China's Maritime Silk Route initiative and the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.<sup>35</sup> The Indian government responded by integrating the Indian Space Research Organisation in the joint construction, launch, and operation of a Maldivian communications satellite as a response to China's involvement in the former for strengthening bilateral relations.<sup>36</sup> Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's Maldivian visit in Oct 2015 signified India's deliberate efforts to enhance bilateral relations, marking it as a watershed moment.<sup>37</sup>

With the election of Mohamed Ibrahim Solih in 2018, the situation took a dramatic turn, resulting in the restoration of democracy and the reinvigoration of strong connections between

the Maldives and New Delhi. Solih implemented his 'India First' policy to strengthen the varied and mutually beneficial cooperation between India and the Maldives.<sup>38</sup> The Maldives implemented this approach by withdrawing from its trade deal with Beijing.<sup>39</sup> India offered USD 1.4 bn in loan repayment assistance to the Maldives, as well as additional financial help for community development programs.<sup>40</sup> India's ability to strengthen its close relationship with the Maldives has been influenced by President Solih's political choices, particularly in enhancing defence and security cooperation with India as part of its regional foreign policy agenda. During Prime Minister Modi's state visit to the Maldives in 2019, both countries released a joint statement reaffirming their strong commitment to further strengthening their historically strong and cordial relations.<sup>41</sup> The statement also hailed India's financial assistance in addressing debt issues emanating from China's previous investments. Following bilateral agreements, India's USD 800 mn line of credit facilitated the implementation of various development projects, including the USD 100 mn Greater Malé Connectivity Project, the supply of construction materials for public parks on 67 local islands, and the construction of bridges connecting the capital city, Malé, with regional and industrial islands.<sup>42</sup> Indo-Maldives relations flourished during Solih's tenure.

### **Dr Mohamed Muizzu's Victory and altered Indo-Maldivian Relationship**

With completion of his term, elections were conducted in Sep 2023 and on 01 Oct 2023, Dr Mohamed Muizzu became the new president of the island nation. Dr Muizzu is a member of the PNC and formerly served as opposition leader in partnership with the PPM.<sup>43</sup> He will succeed the incumbent president, Ibrahim Mohammed Solih of the Maldives Democratic Party, on 17 Nov 2023.<sup>44</sup> The change of leadership in India's neighbouring area is crucial for New Delhi because of historical links, geographical closeness, and China's rising influence in the region, both in terms of development and strategic concerns. The Maldives' government's evolving stance has generated uncertainty in India-Maldives ties. Beyond political shifts in the Maldivian administration, the issue needs a deeper understanding of the relationship. The appointment of Dr Muizzu has alarmed some, who perceive it as a setback for Indian diplomacy in the Maldives. President Muizzu's statement on the withdrawal of foreign armed forces to protect its

sovereignty and territorial integrity has sparked international interest.<sup>45</sup> The strategic world instantly viewed this action as a tilt towards China and away from India. India is the only country that has 75 military personnel that are stationed in MNDF bases at Hanimaadhoo in the north, Kadhdhoo in the centre of the country and Addu Atoll in the south, principally to operate two light combat helicopters, the Dhruv, and the Dornier aircraft.<sup>46</sup> These aircraft have been used to monitor the EEZ and give medical aid to the islands, saving many lives over the years. India has traditionally been the Maldives' principal security ally, providing considerable assistance to strengthen the Maldives' maritime security capabilities.<sup>47</sup> As Malé strives to balance its economic and developmental alliances, it must do so while maintaining key security connections with India, which are critical for maintaining peace and stability in the Indian Ocean area. The Maldives understands the significance of a safe, secure, and stable Indian Ocean for its own security. Hence, to foster security relationship with India more transparent and aligned with the Maldives' objectives, the future administration will need to examine and change it.

Moreover, the World Bank has warned the Maldivian government of an economic slowdown over the next two years, especially if the government continues to borrow at high interest rates given the global economic recession.<sup>48</sup> According to the World Bank's study Maldives can expect a real Gross Domestic Product growth of 6.5 per cent in 2023, with an average growth rate of 5.4 per cent from 2024 to 2025.<sup>49</sup> While the Muizzu administration is expected to seek debt restructuring from India and China, it may still require foreign investment for new development projects that produce assets and jobs, hence maintaining the economy. In comparison to China, which not only supplies finance but also imports labour, possibly displacing local people and their earnings, India has a great track record as a development partner for third-world nations. India's 'neighbourhood first' policy has historically aided nations such as Sri Lanka during times of crisis and announced 100 mn Maldivian Rufiyaa for community development projects in the Maldives to generate employment.<sup>50</sup>

## Way Forward

Following the relationship between both nations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first foreign leader to congratulate President Muizzu on his win.<sup>51</sup> He also conveyed his support in a letter given by Indian High Commissioner Munu Muhawar during their post-election meeting.<sup>52</sup> The PPM-PNC alliance of President Muizzu praised the conference as ‘fruitful’, emphasising that discussions focused on improving bilateral relations.<sup>53</sup> Despite Muizzu’s initial India-out campaign, he has also expressed a desire to maintain a balanced relationship between India and China.<sup>54</sup> This places the responsibility on Malé to navigate a delicate path between the two regional giants, India and China, which will be a necessary challenge for any leader who assumes power. The incoming administration must negotiate carefully to sustain the benefits of cooperation with India while also exploring prospects for engagement with other key players in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent Maldives election highlights the tangled web of internal politics and foreign policy. While Muizzu’s views on India and China appear to be diametrically opposed, the region’s geopolitical realities need a complex balancing act. His ability to cross this gap will not only be a credit to his leadership but will also play a critical role in moulding the Maldives’ international fate in the geopolitical world. The emerging relationship between India and the Maldives under Muizzu will be widely monitored since it could influence regional dynamics and alliances in the Indo-Pacific.

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