

## Implications of Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 3 arrival in Maldives

---

### Background

On 22 January 2024, the Maldivian government was reported to have given clearance to a Chinese research vessel named 'Xiang Yang Hong 3' to dock at the Male port somewhere in the first week of Feb 2024. This development is occurring in the backdrop of the recent change of government in Maldives where Pro-China Mohamed Muizzu has formed the government. We have recently witnessed tensions in bilateral relations between India and Maldives where a controversy erupted when a few serving deputy ministers in the Muizzu government posted derogatory remarks against Indian PM Narendra Modi when he posted photos in social media on his visit to Lakshadweep islands.

Those photos were seen by few ministers in Maldives as a promotional activity of Lakshadweep by the Indian PM and thereby giving competition to the tourism industry in Maldives. Ties were further strained when during this diplomatic spat, President Muizzu made his first official visit to China, a departure from the past because previously Maldivian leaders used to visit New Delhi as a sign of friendship with India. And on return of his trip from China, President Muizzu made indirect remarks against India asking New Delhi not to bully Maldives because of its small size.<sup>[1]</sup> All these recent events can have a direct bearing on India's maritime security interests and needs an effective strategy.

### Reasons for the port visit of Chinese vessel

The first and foremost reason for the arrival of the research vessel 'Xiang Yang Hong 3' in Maldives could obviously be economic in nature. We know that President Muizzu paid a state visit to China from 8 to 12 Jan 2024.<sup>[2]</sup> During that visit several key Memorandum of Understanding (MoU's) were signed between China and Maldives. The MoU's pertaining to maritime cooperation were signed for deepening blue economy cooperation between the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and the Maldivian Ministry of Fisheries and Ocean Resources. A second MoU deals with Marine Cooperation Towards Blue Partnership between Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources and the Maldivian Ministry of Fisheries and Ocean Resources.<sup>[3]</sup> These two agreements could well explain the approval from the Maldives government to grant China permission to send its research vessel as Maldives would like to gather knowledge about its fisheries resources and subsequent protection of its marine environment in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and, thus, China could provide valuable information.

The second reason could very well be to secure their core interests. As per the joint press statement released by the Chinese and Maldivian leadership during this visit, the two sides resolved to firmly support each other in safeguarding their respective core national interests. Maldives agreed to commit completely to 'One-China policy', thereby recognizing Taiwan to be a part of China. In reciprocation, China agreed to support Maldives in safeguarding its national sovereignty and independence, and firmly opposed any kind of external interference in the internal affairs of the Maldives. This statement was clearly pointed towards the Indo-Maldives diplomatic row which erupted on 4 Jan 2024, just a few days before this state visit. This messaging was seen to be directed towards India because of the growing demands from Indian community to take stern action against Maldives. In this regard, India had summoned the Maldivian envoy Ibrahim Shaheeb, a day after India's mission in Male "Strongly raised and

expressed concerns" with the Maldivian foreign ministry.<sup>[4]</sup> There were also calls on social media by Indian tourists to boycott Maldives as tourism destination as India is a major contributor for the Maldivian economy and accounts for around one-third of its economy.<sup>[5]</sup>

The third reason could be for China to score geopolitical goals over India because earlier this year on 1 Jan 2024, Sri Lanka decided not to permit any Chinese research vessel to dock at any of its ports or EEZ for research purposes for a period of one year. This moratorium was put in place after India and the United States (US) raised objections to the earlier visit of the Chinese research vessel 'Shi Yan-6' which docked at the Colombo port last year in October 2023. This moratorium meant that the vessel 'Xiang Yang Hong 3', which was about to visit Sri Lanka for research purpose had to find other alternative destination.<sup>[6]</sup> For China, Maldives seemed to be the easy choice in the backdrop of the Lakshadweep row. On 13 Jan 2024, upon arrival from China, President Muizzu made an indirect statement towards India that no one country owns the Indian ocean, and he reiterated that the Maldives is an independent and sovereign state.<sup>[7]</sup> On 22 Jan, the Vice Minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party made a visit to Maldives to promptly implement the various agreements signed during the President Muizzu's recent state visit to China.<sup>[8]</sup> And finally on the same day itself, open source intelligence experts declared that 'Xiang Yang Hong 3' was headed towards Male.<sup>[9]</sup> All the above events look somehow closely interrelated.

### **Capabilities of 'Xiang Yang Hong 3'**

As per open source this research vessel 'Xiang Yang Hong 3' has been defined as a general survey vessel constructed by China State Shipbuilding Corporation in 2016. It has a displacement of 4,800 tonnes, 99.6 meters in length and is owned by Ministry of Natural Resources of China. It is reported to have advanced capabilities fitted with all-electric 'azimuth' thrusters and bow thrusters, which allow it to turn 360 degrees at same location. It also has ice-breaking capabilities. It can conduct research into a wide range of areas, including ocean waters, microbial genetic resources, polymetallic nodules in both deep-sea and coastal regions, as well as deep-sea environments and biodiversity. Its specialised equipment can be used in high-pressure, low-temperature, low-nutrient and low-light deep-sea environments, as well as to cultivate micro-organisms in ways that can't be done on land.<sup>[10]</sup>

Previously in 2021, this same vessel was seen operating in the Indian Ocean near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It was accused of doing activities without broadcasting its position. It has been previously found that this survey vessel may be extracting a lot of underwater data on ocean currents or water properties for naval planners to help submarines navigate or remain undetected in the Indian Ocean Region. It conducts seabed mapping tours using high resolution side scan sonars. It also has the capability to release long-endurance Uncrewed Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) for gathering the ocean data. It can also release underwater gliders like the 'Sea Wing' or 'Haiyi' for this research purpose.

### **Way ahead for India:**

The above scenario is very critical for India considering the growing tensions with the current Maldives government. India has limited options in the diplomatic space as of now, apart from calling on the government of Maldives to respect India's security concerns. India can take help from the US to put pressure on President Muizzu to tone down his anti-India stance, thereby, restricting Chinese activities in the island nation. Maldives is also aware of the repercussions of being seen too pro-China so soon because it can have domestic repercussions due to protests

from opposition political parties like the Maldivian Democratic Party. May be for that the Maldivian Foreign Ministry has announced that the Chinese vessel would not be conducting any research while in Maldivian waters.<sup>[11]</sup> But this announcement may contain a hidden caveat that although the vessel itself may not conduct any research, the underwater drones and gliders can conduct research and India should be careful about that.

### **Conclusion:**

The above events should be an eye-opener for India that underwater marine warfare and research activities will pose a security threat in the long run. The Indian Ocean is getting warmer due to the geopolitical tussle between India and China and small island nations have a key role. In the near future India should definitely develop technical methods to prevent such underwater research activities by devising counter hydrographic survey methods using environmental factors like weather, ocean waves, currents, tides, salinity, turbidity, temperature etc. The militarisation of Lakshadweep Islands and operational activities of the Karwar naval base will extra add security.

### **Endnotes:**

[1] Krishan Francis, 'Maldives gives port clearance to a Chinese ship. The move could inflame a dispute with India', *Associated Press*, 23 January 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/maldives-india-china-research-ship-0c12d6292f7709e72e1e1ce52e691828>

[2] Hua Chunying, 'President Mohamed Muizzu of the Maldives to Visit China', *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 5 January 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/wsrc\\_665395/202401/t20240105\\_11218928.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/wsrc_665395/202401/t20240105_11218928.html)

[3] 'Key Agreements exchanged between the Maldives and China', *The President's Office Republic of Maldives*, 10 January 2024, <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29600>

[4] 'India-Maldives row escalates, agency suspends flight bookings to islands', *Channel News Asia*, 8 January 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/india-maldives-row-escalates-agency-suspends-flight-bookings-islands-4031646>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Shishir Gupta, 'Colombo bans Chinese research ships from entering Sri Lankan ports for a year', *Hindustan Times*, 1 January 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/colombo-bans-chinese-research-ships-from-entering-sri-lankan-ports-for-a-year-101704077211367.html>

[7] 'The President corroborates China-Maldives relations as a model of mutual respect', *The President's Office Republic of Maldives*, 13 January 2024, <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29642>

[8] 'The Vice Minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party pays a courtesy call on the President', *The President's Office Republic of Maldives*, 22 January 2024, <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/29681>

[9] 'XIANG YANG HONG 03 a Chinese ocean research vessel is entering the Indian Ocean Region, displaying its destination as Male, the vessel is expected to run an ocean survey operation in the Indian Ocean Region raising concern in #India' (@detresfa, January, 22,

2024) [https://twitter.com/detresfa/status/1749338965474463959?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet](https://twitter.com/detresfa/status/1749338965474463959?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet)

[10] Zhang Chun, 'Nine extraordinary Chinese research vessels', *China Dialogue Ocean*, 2 October 2020, <https://chinadialogueocean.net/en/climate/15239-nine-extraordinary-chinese-research-vessels/#:~:text=The Xiang Yang Hong 03,360 degrees on the spot.>

[11] "Welcome vessels of friendly nations': Maldives confirms docking of Chinese 'research' ship", *Indian Express*, 24 January 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/welcome-vessels-friendly-nations-maldives-confirms-chinese-research-ship-9124195/>

**Ajay Kumar Das**, Independent Researcher and Analyst of International Affairs and Security Studies.

**Article uploaded on 5-02-2024**

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India