

Maldivian President Muizzu's reset with India: Reconciliation or Compulsion

Introduction

Since Mar 2024, after being elected President of Maldives, Mohammed Muizzu has started to recognise India as a 'Closest Ally' and sought to repair the relationship which got damaged earlier due to his party People's National Congress' (PNC) anti-India rhetoric. The anti-India rhetoric got aggravated further as some ministers from Muizzu's cabinet made derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Modi in the backdrop of his visit to Lakshadweep, leading to backlash from Indian tourists and the Maldives tourism sector was badly hit. While it has been known that President Muizzu had an anti-India and pro-China stance, it was a surprise to see his softening stance towards India after getting elected. While the last few months has seen a normalcy in ties and lowering of tensions with the diplomatic spat, question remains whether the sentiments being shown by President Muizzu stems from his personal desire to improve relations with India or just to extract the necessary deals from India to safeguard his national interests? Compulsion and reconciliation are two different aspects and the reset in Indo-Maldivian relations has elements of both.

Indian debt restructuring

In his first interview after taking office, President Muizzu was heard seeking debt relief amounting to USD 1.4 mn from India which the previous government under the leadership of President Solih had obtained from the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of India. The previous government had also requested the deployment of Indian troops, Dornier 228 maritime patrol aircraft, and two Hindustan Aeronautics Limited Dhruv helicopters from India in Maldives.^[1] In both the above circumstances, the government of India has given some assistance monetarily and militarily to Maldives. If, for President Muizzu, the presence of Indian troops was a matter of concern with regards to sovereignty and national security, he could have made similar requests in a cool manner without resorting to anti-India rhetoric. The infrastructural projects being developed by India in Maldives is also something which doesn't bother President Muizzu as he doesn't have any objection with India contributing to Maldives' development.^[2] Therefore, for President Muizzu on one hand, the Indian troops and platforms which are mostly deployed in Maldives for humanitarian and disaster relief purposes are a threat to Maldives sovereignty but on other hand the presence of Indian infrastructure companies and Indian loans obtained by previous government is not a threat.

Maldives Tourism requirement from India

In 2023, India accounted for around 11.1 per cent of the total tourist arrival in Maldives. This number dropped to around 6.1 per cent in 2024. Clearly, there has been a drastic fall after the diplomatic spat. Tourism itself contributes to around 25 per cent of the Maldivian economy and Indian tourists generated around USD 380 mn revenue in 2023.^[3] President Muizzu visited China after taking over office, which itself was a departure from the previous predecessors because earlier Maldives leadership used to visit India first as India is closer to Maldives. During his China trip, he requested the Chinese leaders to send more tourists to Maldives after the diplomatic spat with India. In 2023, India sent the highest number of tourists to Maldives followed by Russia and China. But even though the number of Chinese tourists have gone up in Maldives, their numbers are not so promising due to economic slowdown in China itself.^[4] Further the total number of tourists itself is not a guarantee of revenue generation for

tourism industry. It also depends on the amount of expenditure of tourists which can vary. Therefore, Maldives must have felt the need to attract more tourists from India and avoid depending on China too much.

India's External Affairs Minister recent visit

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar visited Maldives from 9 to 11 Aug 2024 to boost bilateral ties. The aim was to enhance India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and the 'Security and Growth for all in the Region' vision.^[5] During this trip, various notes and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) were exchanged in areas of healthcare, civil infrastructure, digital payment system, Commerce and Trade, training and capacity building.^[6] Apart from this, there were official discussions with regards to India's loan grants, 'Line of Credit' schemes, investment, Foreign Direct Investment, defence and maritime security cooperation, etc.^[7] The contents of these MoUs have not been released in the public domain. The progress of Greater Male Connectivity Project and Addu Development Project has also been reviewed, thereby, confirming India's continuing involvement in infrastructure projects.^[8] When Dr. S Jaishankar paid a courtesy visit to President Muizzu, they discussed areas of cooperation in fields of economy, housing, defence, tourism, etc.^[9]

India's security concerns still unresolved

Even though the relations are slowly going back to normalcy, how much can India trust these overtures by Maldives? Take, for example, the vital area of security. Even though the Maldivian Foreign Minister (FM) Moosa Zameer has denied the existence of military alliance with China and has assured that Maldives has no intention of allowing foreign military on its soil, both these assurances are tricky & doubtful.^[10] Firstly, India shouldn't expect Maldives to cease all its military relations with China. Maldives defence ministry has already signed a 'Military Assistance' deal with China in Mar 2024, without giving out full information.^[11] Secondly, even though the Maldivian government has no intention to allow foreign military on its 'Soil', it can still allow foreign naval presence in its 'Waters'. Maldives doesn't have a large landmass area but it does have a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Chinese Ambassador has already met the Maldivian Defence Minister Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon and discussed defence cooperation and issues of mutual concern even before President Muizzu officially made his first India visit.^[12] Earlier this year, Chinese research vessel 'Xiang Yang Hong 03' spent 3 months in Maldives EEZ much to the concern of India.^[13] Further, in Jul 2024, the same vessel was reported to be heading towards Maldives for the 3rd time this year.^[14] On top of all these, President Muizzu's party PNC has called for a parliamentary enquiry into three previous agreements signed with India, namely the Hydrographic Surveys Pact, Uthuru Thila Falhu naval base development agreement and gifting of a Dornier aircraft. This decision was taken amidst President Muizzu's official visit to India in Jun 2024.^[15]

Conclusion

Taking note of the above events, it can be estimated that President Muizzu's recent diplomatic outreach towards India lacks the comprehensive elements to fully win India's trust at the moment. The outreach mainly stems from the fact that Maldives economy is in choppy waters and the restructuring of Indian debts or request for Indian tourists can't be made under tense bilateral relations. The recent visit of India's FM to Maldives was more of a reciprocal visit rather than to sort out things completely. Dr. S Jaishankar's visit lacked any discussion to renew the

India-Maldives hydrographic survey agreements and to prevent the regular arrival of Chinese research vessels in Maldives EEZ. India's infrastructure development initiatives mainly benefit Maldives, but Maldives' inability to prevent Chinese research vessels from docking at its ports will be a core security concern for India in the future. Overall, the India-Maldives reset at the moment seems more like a compulsion rather than true reconciliation for both parties.

Endnotes

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