

## MALDIVES WALKING TIGHT ROPE BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA

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*Like all the South Asian small states, the Maldives has been subjected to great power politics. There are five principles of Maldives' foreign policy (mostly reciprocating with India's 'Panchsheel') and six goals that revolve around sovereignty, identity, and Islamic nationalism. But due to the increasingly tense geopolitical environment, foreign policy adaptation has been a challenging task for the Maldives. As a result, Maldives' internal political environment is largely polarized to 'Anti or Pro- India or China' when it comes to managing the changing geopolitical discourse. This issue brief aims to untangle the sources of Maldives' foreign policy toward China and India so as to identify how the Maldives has adjusted to the changing geopolitical environment in South Asia.*

### Introduction

“The Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) maintains an international bargaining power denied to most small and poverty-stricken states. Astride major shipping lanes, this island nation offers natural sites for air bases and naval military airfield on its southernmost island, Gan (about 300 miles from the US military facility on Diego Garcia), which could provide a military airbase and deep-sea harbours to any power hoping to dominate the Indian Ocean.”

— *Maldives: Small but Strategic Real Estate (CIA 1983)*<sup>1</sup>

This statement still reflects the strategic importance that the Maldives have. Power politics in Indian Ocean Region was less complex when this report was written by the CIA in 1983, however, due to the rise of China and India the scenario is becoming more volatile. Since independence, India and Sri Lanka remained key players in the Maldives. The Maldives lie in India's so called 'Security Perimeter', making India particularly uneasy if any other power increases their activities in the area. Beijing too realized the Maldives' strategic importance as it expanded its involvement in the Indian Ocean starting in 2008. The Maldives'

geographic location is close to vital sea lanes significant for China's energy supplies.<sup>2</sup>

Given the competitive approach of India and China, the Maldives developed its own way of dealing with competition. Depending on the ruling government, the strategy is to pro- or against China and/or India—basically a 'flip-flop strategy'. Some of the other states in South Asia such as Nepal and Sri Lanka too have adopted the 'flip-flop strategy' to deal with the increasing competition between China and India. This strategy has sometimes proven handy as it brings immediate benefits, however, in the long term it could impact the credibility of the country's international image as well as create massive polarization in internal politics.

The Maldives for some time has been debating how best to further its national security and economic goals in an area where geopolitical tensions between larger Indo-Pacific countries like China, India, and the United States are steadily increasing. The previous administration of the Maldives, which was headed by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, unapologetically focused the nation's foreign policy on India as a source of security and economic advantages.<sup>3</sup> The primary opposition group, represented by the slogan 'India Out', has adopted a strong strategy to erode these connections or even eliminate India's military presence in the Maldives, despite the fact

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that the previous government had aggressively worked to improve ties with New Delhi.<sup>4</sup>

There is pre-determined viewpoint regarding the Maldives and its approach to managing the rise of China and India and these pre-determinations are based on literature written from an Indian or Chinese perspective. So, this issue brief aims to fill the gap by bringing the Maldivian side of the analysis in terms of understanding the China-India dynamics. The anchor point of the analysis will be China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. The rationale behind considering only the 'Strings of Pearls' is that most of the recent academic work have in one way or another discussed the Chinese strategy as a departure point of Maldivian geopolitics.

### **Strategic Objectives of String of Pearls**

The String of Pearls (SOP) is a comprehensive geopolitical strategy that's a core part of China's extensive maritime efforts, especially seen in its significant investments across the Indian Ocean region.<sup>5</sup> This strategic paradigm, initially coined in a seminal report to the U.S. Congress by the Booz Allen Hamilton consulting group, encompasses an intricate web of strategically positioned Chinese infrastructure projects extending from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean; it has since become a widely used concept in strategic analyses.<sup>6</sup> Beyond mere economic collaboration, these investments signify a calculated endeavor to establish Chinese influence through increased connectivity and strategic positioning.<sup>7</sup>

Operating within the frameworks of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the SOP serves as a vehicle for China's global ascendancy.<sup>8</sup> However, its ramifications are most acutely felt within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), evoking debates and apprehensions among regional powers, notably India and the United States. The strategic significance of Chinese investments, concentrated around vital maritime chokepoints, has elicited scrutiny and consternation, potentially disrupting established regional dynamics and spheres of influence.<sup>9</sup>

By 2021, China had entrenched itself firmly within the IOR, having completed 44 mega projects in

South Asia, with an additional 24 underway and 20 more in the pipeline.<sup>10</sup> These projects, predominantly centered on infrastructure development encompassing railways, bridges, ports, and airports, underscore China's unwavering commitment to reshaping the regional landscape.<sup>11</sup> However, it is the maritime infrastructure, particularly ports, which have sparked considerable unease among regional policymakers.<sup>12</sup> The looming shadow of possible dual-use capabilities, wherein ostensibly civilian facilities could swiftly be repurposed for military ends, looms large, fuelled by open advocacy within Chinese circles for the maintenance of overt military facilities, has been a particular cause for concern.<sup>13</sup>

Amidst increasing geopolitical rivalries between China, the U.S., and India, the full scope of the SOP strategy remains unclear. While some perceive it as a broad strategy aimed at global pre-eminence, others view it as a targeted effort to encircle and constrain India, thus curtailing its strategic maneuverability. However, conclusive evidence substantiating such claims remains elusive.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, it is evident that the SOP addresses critical vulnerabilities in China's geopolitical posture, particularly concerning the safeguarding of its sea lines of communication.

China's heavy reliance on maritime trade underscores the imperative of securing these sea routes. With 80 percent of its crude oil imports and a significant portion of its trade with Western markets conducted via sea, the Indian Ocean emerges as a pivotal theater.<sup>15</sup> Key choke points such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb punctuate these maritime routes, amplifying China's strategic exposure. To mitigate these vulnerabilities and assert greater control over sea lanes, China conceived the SOP as a strategic imperative.

The 'Pearls' of the SOP, strategically positioned across the Indian Ocean, serve as pivotal nodes from which China can project influence and assert control. However, their efficacy hinges upon partnerships aligned with China's vision for the region or mechanisms to coerce compliance. The prominent Pearls, including the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar, epitomize China's strategic calculus.

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Pakistan, a longstanding ally of China and a historical adversary of India, embodies a natural partner for China's maritime ambitions.<sup>16</sup> As it seeks to curb Indian influence in the region, Pakistan has entered into a formal partnership with China that irritates India's maritime affairs. The Gwadar Port Deal was signed in 2013 under the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>17</sup>

The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, though marred by controversies surrounding its lease terms and accusations of debt trap diplomacy, will be under Chinese control for the entirety of the 21st century.<sup>18</sup> There are genuine concerns about the potential establishment of a Chinese base in Sri Lanka, given its strategic location along the main sea lines of communication.<sup>19</sup> However, it's worth noting that Sri Lanka maintains control over its largest port, and India appears to maintain the upper hand in terms of security cooperation.<sup>20</sup>

Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port, strategically positioned as an alternative to the Malacca Strait, exemplifies China's expanding influence in the region. Despite ongoing internal strife and increased U.S. investment, Myanmar remains firmly in the Chinese sphere of influence. It is evident that Beijing has secured a foothold in the aforementioned states. However, as previously discussed, these projects are not without their challenges. Growing concerns about Chinese influence in the region and issues such as economic disparities and conflicts are

plaguing the partner states, prompting questions about the sustainability of the SOP. Rising tensions in bilateral relations further undermine Beijing's ability to exert influence in the region.<sup>21</sup>

The SOP embodies China's ambitious quest for maritime dominance, strategically manifested through a network of infrastructure investments across the Indian Ocean. While its geopolitical ramifications are profound, the SOP reflects China's concerted efforts to safeguard its sea routes, assert control over critical chokepoints, and reshape the regional order. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, the SOP remains a focal point of strategic contention, shaping the future trajectory of maritime geopolitics in the Indian Ocean region and beyond.

It thus becomes necessary to delve deeper into the evolving dynamics between the island nation and China. The Maldives, it should be recalled, occupies a strategic position mere hundreds of miles from the Indian coastline.<sup>22</sup> Situated in close proximity to key sea routes traversing the IOR, this small island nation emerges as an immensely appealing partner within the SOP framework.

This characterization underscores the geopolitical significance of the Maldives, positioned strategically along vital maritime arteries in the Indian Ocean. Its

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proximity to major sea lanes renders it a pivotal player in regional dynamics, with implications extending far beyond its diminutive size.<sup>23</sup> Through an analysis of the Maldives' foreign policy principles, we gain deeper insights into the potential role it can assume in the SOP.

## **Evolution of Maldivian Foreign Policy**

In this section, we aim to showcase what guides Maldivian foreign policy and what mechanisms are crucial to its implementation. The Maldives shares a similar outlook on foreign policy as many post-colonial states. The roots of Maldivian foreign policy principles are briefly discussed here along with the evolution of the presidency and democratic institutions after the 2008 election. In concluding, we will showcase how these findings have remained constant throughout the constantly evolving bilateral relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Getting into the historical context Maldives got its formal independence in 1965. Despite never being fully colonized due to its limited resources, the archipelago experienced significant British influence following the signing of a protectorate agreement in 1887.<sup>24</sup> The terms of independence signed in 1965 were heavily influenced by ideas of national sovereignty and self-proclamation.<sup>25</sup> The institutions established post-independence led to the formation of an authoritarian republic, which aimed to enhance its independence and harbored deep skepticism towards Western norms.<sup>26</sup> The country's foreign policy is driven by a deep desire for independence, self-determination, non-interference in domestic affairs and the desire for economic prosperity. These principles are combined with a deep skepticism of the west and western institutions.<sup>27</sup>

In 2008 the Maldives witnessed great political change as the regime around president Gayoom was ousted in an election. Following the election of President Nasheed, the government adopted a new constitution. However, challenges regarding democratization persisted as the constitutional changes created a divide within the nation between entrenched elites and those advocating for greater democratization.<sup>28</sup> The old elites retained significant power, leading to a presidency that underwent

minimal restructuring and faced limited constraints on its privileges concerning foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> The elected president is not constrained by democratic institutions from pursuing an individualistic and self-interested foreign policy, ultimately interpreting these driving principles.<sup>30</sup> This leads in turn to a volatile foreign policy, as the entrenched parties have contrary visions for the direction of the Maldives foreign policy. This recurring theme underscores a consistent pattern in the formulation of the Maldives' foreign policy agenda. At this time, the relationship with China also started to evolve.

In 2013, then-President Yameen announced the Maldives' decision to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>31</sup> The deepening relationship with Beijing marked a significant departure from the Maldives' previous 'India First' policy, constituting a major shift in its foreign policy stance. The Maldives regard the Chinese development model as offering highly beneficial and mutually advantageous opportunities for national development purposes.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the manner of engagement with the Chinese partners appealed to the Maldives, as the cooperation came without any conditions regarding domestic affairs or economic policy. This stood in contrast to the stipulations often attached to cooperation with Western-based programs.<sup>33</sup>

Yameen signed BRI projects totaling about US\$ 1 billion. Among the projects were an extension to the international airport and the "Friendship Bridge" connecting Male Island to the Airport Island.<sup>34</sup> This announcement ruffled some feathers in India since the airport project was contracted to an Indian company under the previous administration.<sup>35</sup>

Ties to China continued to deepen during the Yameen administration. In 2017, the two parties signed the Maldives' first Free Trade Agreement (FTA).<sup>36</sup> In the 2018 election, Yameen's pro-China government was defeated by Ibrahim Solhi.<sup>37</sup> The change in government also shifted the foreign policy agenda; the 'India First' strategy was reinstated.<sup>38</sup> This meant cancelling the FTA with the Chinese and turning to Delhi for relief on the debt burden caused by the various BRI projects.<sup>39</sup>

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In 2023, the Maldives repeated their pattern of recent election history. The incumbent Solhi was defeated by the pro-China candidate Muizzu.<sup>40</sup> Muizzu campaigned on a populist 'India Out' platform, claiming that Indian activities in the Maldives infringed on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. The campaign targeted three developments in cooperation with India under the Solhi government.<sup>41</sup>

One, the Maldives and India had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2019 for a hydrographic survey to map the "physical features of the Islands, reefs, sandbanks, and lagoons" of the Maldives.<sup>42</sup> The 'India Out' opposition alleged that India was utilizing the survey to spy on the Maldives.<sup>43</sup> Two, the stationing of Indian personnel and the Dornier aircraft. This had been requested in 2009 by the Nasheed administration to deal with the rising threat of terrorism.<sup>44</sup> As a part of the deal, India sent 25 unarmed personnel to assist the Maldives with maintenance of the aircraft and the training of pilots.<sup>45</sup> A news outlet close to the opposition leaked a document that was to provide proof of India's expansionist ambitions, further stoking the flames of opposition.<sup>46</sup>

Three, the Uthuru Thilafahlu (UTF) agreement, which was originally proposed under the pro-China Yameen government but finally signed in 2021. The agreement foresaw the co-development of a dock and a harbor for the Maldives coastguard as well as the stationing of Indian personnel to assist in training and maintenance.<sup>47</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the election, Muizzu announced

that he would pressure India to remove all personnel stationed on the island and vowed to review all of the approximately 100 agreements signed with India during the Solhi administration.<sup>48</sup> The success of the ‘India Out’ campaign, despite the majority of the opposition’s claims being either exaggerated or disproven, serves as further evidence of the anxiety felt in the Maldives regarding the erosion of self-determination and the encroachment of foreign influence.<sup>49</sup>

The Maldives has navigated a decade marked by fluctuating foreign policy stances, oscillating between alignments with India and China. This shifting dynamic provides valuable insights for observers. At the forefront of Maldivian priorities, irrespective of the ruling government, is economic development. While acknowledging its paramount significance, it is essential to recognize that the scope of development aspirations is tempered by principles emphasizing non-interference in domestic affairs and a steadfast commitment to sovereignty so far leading to considerable constraints regarding the scope of cooperation with major powers.

## Maldives and Increasing Tension between India-China in Indian Ocean

The potential impact of India and China’s strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean on the stability and security of the area might be significant. When it comes to the region, New Delhi often has a somewhat possessive attitude and doubts the validity of any extra regional naval presence, especially with China.<sup>50</sup> However, Indian analysts believe that China has strategic weaknesses in the Indian Ocean. Beijing, on the other hand, rejects India’s assertions of unique prerogatives or great-power status in the IOR.

Securing its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) across the Indian Ocean is China’s main strategic priority in the IOR. Beijing is well aware that the small chokepoints that the majority of trade must travel through make its SLOCs extremely vulnerable to attacks from both state and non-state actors.<sup>51</sup> India believes it is the dominant state in the Indian Ocean and that it is destined to be the area’s natural leader.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it views the IOR as sort of a private domain and considers the presence

of extra-regional naval powers—China in particular—to be fundamentally unlawful. India has long aspired to rule the Indian Ocean as the leading nation. Many in New Delhi consider the Indian Ocean to be essentially ‘India’s ocean,’ despite the fact that few Indian officials would want to acknowledge this in public.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the competition of increasing or sustaining the sphere of influence on the island or littoral countries in the Indian Ocean Region keeps getting intensified.

China and India are both trying to sway the political landscape of the Maldives. In keeping with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘neighborhood first’ policy, India seeks to hold onto its dominance in South Asia and to stop China from constructing a purported ‘String of Pearls’, or naval bases along the Indian coast. Meanwhile, China intends to push forward with its plans for the MSR and BRI while also continuing its steady development into the Indian Ocean. According to World Bank data, the Maldives owes China \$1.37 billion, or around 20 percent of its public debt, which puts Beijing ahead of Saudi Arabia and India, which it owes \$124 million and \$123 million, respectively, as its largest bilateral creditor. Since the Maldives decided to join the BRI, Chinese companies have made additional investments in the country totaling \$1.37 billion, according to data from the American Enterprise Institute.<sup>54</sup> As a result of the Maldives’ ‘flip-flop strategy’ towards India and China since 2008, the geopolitical vulnerability of the country has been growing exponentially. Moreover, the increasing dependency on Chinese development assistance or loans has increased the possibility of Maldives becoming another Sri Lanka.

There are three main projects in the Maldives which bring to the fore the many controversies regarding possible Chinese presence in civil and military capabilities. The first one is *Feydhoo Finolhu*, a tiny islet measuring only 0.5 square miles, situated 3 nautical miles from Male, the capital of the Maldives. In December 2016, the island was leased for 50 years to an unidentified Chinese corporation for the low cost of \$4 million.<sup>55</sup> There were rumors that this was more than just a commercial development because of its advantageous location—the islet would be ideally positioned to watch traffic to and from the

nearby international airport on Male, for example—and its inexpensive price tag. Second, the *Kunaavashi* project. *Kunaavashi*, an atoll 35 nautical miles from Male, is the site of a resort being constructed by a different Chinese developer. There has also been conjecture about the Tolarno Maldives *Kunaavashi* Resort's potential covert military applications.<sup>56</sup> The third undertaking is called Male/Hulhumale. The capital island of Male and the neighboring island of *Hulhumale* have been the site of China's largest and most noticeable infrastructure initiatives in the Maldives. The Maldives' administrative and commercial hub is located here. Furthermore, in recent years, the government has committed a substantial sum of funds and effort to modernizing its infrastructure. The building of the Sinamale Bridge that connects Male's Velana International Airport to Hulhumale and its enlargement have been the two most significant undertakings.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the range of projects that China is involved in, it is hard for anyone to pinpoint which project is part of China's so-called 'String of Pearls'. The Chinese presence has also led to controversy on many occasions. During the election campaign, former President Mohamed Nasheed stated that China had taken more land than the East India Company had at the height of the 19th century—all without firing a single shot. Furthermore, he said that the Asian economic superpower had already occupied more than "16 islands."<sup>58</sup> The IMF has also placed the Maldives in the high-risk zone of possible debt trap.<sup>59</sup>

India and the Maldives have a long history of shared ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial ties, resulting in positive and multifaceted relations. India was one of the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the Maldives following its independence in 1965.<sup>60</sup> India is a key development partner in the Maldives, establishing institutions such as the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH), Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET), and Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies (IMFFHTS). In 1988, India successfully prevented a coup attempt in the Maldives. India and the Maldives had stable political, trade, and security relations until February 2012, when

former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed, who supported India, resigned.<sup>61</sup> However, since 2012 two dynamics changed the India's position in Maldives. First, China's strategic orientation shifted toward the Indian Ocean Region and second, due to China's changed perception toward Maldives, there is a marked rise in anti-Indian political discourse. Since then, the Maldives 'flip-flop' strategy has become more institutionalized. The Maldives since 2012 have either seen pro-Chinese or pro-Indian governments.

To counter China's 'String of Pearls', India has also come up with 'Necklace of Diamonds' strategy. The phrase was coined by India's former foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh while speaking at a think tank event in August 2011.<sup>62</sup> Looking at it from the Maldivian perspective, the announcement and speculation of both the 'String of Pearls' and the 'Necklace of Diamonds' have further polarized the political atmosphere of the Maldives. Since graduating from the Least Developed Countries list in 2011, the Maldives has sought to strengthen its partnerships in the Indian Ocean and beyond in order to contribute to regional peace and prosperity.<sup>63</sup> The Maldives has advocated for cooperation in the Indian Ocean that includes all countries in the region and avoids factionalism in order to promote development among the region's ocean communities. However, for a small state subjected to great power politics due to its geopolitical features, it is difficult to unilaterally determine strategic orientation.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Male's ties with New Delhi run deep as they share historically amicable economic and security relations. India is one of the biggest development partners of the Maldives. However, due to the rise of China and the evolving geopolitical dynamics, the situation in the Maldives has become more complicated. We can observe three major things while deconstructing how the Maldives is walking the tight rope between India and China.

First, the Maldives' short-sighted transactional approach. The approach that the Maldives has adopted to deal with

India and China has been described as a ‘flip-flop strategy’ in this issue brief. The strategic incline lies somewhere between ‘band wagoning’ and ‘hedging’ as it does not necessarily fall under the parameter of both concepts. So, the approach merely looks transactional. In a domestic political environment, it gives you an electoral benefit and in a larger foreign policy conduct, it gives you a certain short-term benefit.

Second, the behavior of the Maldives is projecting the rise of China in the regional political scenario. The competition, political polarization in Maldives and the changing perception of Maldives toward India solidifies the rise of China in the Maldives, and in the region. China’s increasing investment in mega infrastructure projects has marginalized the long ongoing India’s small-scale projects. Thus, at first glance, China’s contribution to Maldives’ development looks overwhelming, which is also being translated into the Maldivian perception toward India.

Third, India’s disoriented and inconsistent neighborhood policy. In the past seven decades, India’s position in the region has mostly remained unchallenged. But now due to the rise of China and the day-by-day heating up of blue water geopolitics of Indo-Pacific region, India’s effort is falling short to China’s aggressive approach in the region.

Overall, trying to connect the dots in the usage of the Maldives in China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy is rather complex. But Chinese activities and the Maldives’ increasing proximity to Beijing undermines the established order in the Indian Ocean and India’s neighborhood. Thus, Maldives ‘flip flop’ strategy may bring them immediate benefits but in the long run, it only complicates the competition between great powers.

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