



ENVIRONMENTALLY CHALLENGED MALDIVES: CHINA'S GAMBLE TO DOMINATE INDIAN OCEAN

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Maldives' climate change concern is prevalent that is also reiterated by an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report¹ mentioning it as one of the countries at the vanguard of destruction. In the past, the country drew international attention towards the issue of rising sea level, by conducting an underwater cabinet meeting on October 17, 2009. This island nation with almost four hundred thousand strong population was also hoping in 2008 to buy land abroad and relocate its citizens. However over the years the relocating intentions of Maldivian government had shifted to a very different course of developmental tourism. The incumbent President Yameen's government has successfully found a strategic partner who can finance and facilitate the Maldivian efforts for survival; China. President Yameen's government's new found love for China is not just a continuation of what his predecessor has begun, but he is following his half-brother and

the alleged authoritarian ruler Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's policy of relying to a larger power for protection and survival. This time however, the only difference being that Yameen's pick was China instead of India. China's growing influence is also leading to diplomatic standstill between India and Maldives; for instance, the Maldivian warning to withdraw Indian helicopters stationed in Maldives for assisting Maldivian coastal security infrastructure. Such initiatives are efforts to make room for more Chinese cooperation and allow this 'cooperative partnership' to develop into a 'natural alliance'; as Maldives is greatly in need of a new big brother with a larger wallet to help their efforts to survive the wrath of nature.

Maldives' Efforts to Secure its Survival

Soon after the victory in 2008 elections, the then victorious presidential candidate Mohamed Nasheed stated that the Maldivian government

will soon initiate its proposals to buy some land to relocate its citizens to safety in times of a climate change crisis.² He even admitted both its immediate neighbours India and Sri Lanka are on their list of destined countries. It was a normal initiative from the first democratically elected president, to be concerned about the welfare of his people. President Nasheed led government's concern was not just a mere sea level rise, but an accompanied storm surge that would be catastrophic to the nation. Hence a herculean initiative to 'buy a new home for the whole country' using the billion dollar tourism revenue was under consideration. Later Nasheed's defeat in 2012 Presidential elections made the policy to 'buy some foreign land' take some new turns. The new government led by Abdulla Yameen took some decisive initiations and ratified a new legislation favouring foreign investments in Maldives.

President Yameen's government realized the fact that the mere fraction of a billion dollar tourism revenue won't be enough to buy a new homeland for them. Instead they amended the constitution which prohibited any foreign ownership of Maldivian land, allowing foreign ownership with a condition that at least 70 percent of the project area should be reclaimed from the sea.³ Even though the amendment was made in 2015, there was no further momentous development in this issue until the rumour on a Maldives-Saudi deal about the island of 'Faafu' was brought up in the international arena.⁴ Both the governments

dismissed such claims by calling this rumour as a hoax. Meanwhile the Chinese investments in this small island country were increasing considerably.

Over the course of time it was evident that President Yameen's government was drifting away towards Chinese influence. By the end of July 2018, Chinese tourists made up 18% of the total tourist inflow in to Maldives,⁵ signalling how deeply the Chinese influence had blended into the Maldivian economy which primarily depends on tourism. While Chinese tourists were pouring into Maldives to spend their holidays, the Chinese investors were also en route to Maldives, but for a different mission. Chinese firms were trying to bag Maldivian islands by renting them for a long period of time. Malé's agreement to lease out Feydhoo Finolhu⁶, the nearest uninhabited island to capital Malé and the international airport was part of such Chinese initiatives to increase control over Maldivian land. In fact one of the major criticisms that Yameen's government is facing from the opposition is that they are handing over Maldives to China, along with criticism against his undemocratic methods to counter his criticsers.

The Chinese-Maldivian relations took decisive turns with the signing of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between them on December 7, 2017. Even before the announcement of this FTA, Chinese-Maldivian relations were on a positive growth driven by the massive infrastructure projects such as the upgradation of Hulhule airport, the

construction of the Friendship Bridge connecting the Hulhule airport and the island of Malé⁷. In addition to that various Chinese companies are queuing up to lease out resort islands and for land reclamation projects. Still, the growing Chinese investments on an island country which is predicted to be submerged within decades sound suspicious as to its core intentions. The strategic position of Maldives, amidst crucial shipping lanes passing through the Indian Ocean contributes to this suspicion about the Chinese activities.

Since the entry of China, there has been a paradigm shift in Maldivian behaviour and policies. An island nation which was planning to invest its revenue to buy land on foreign countries, is now investing that revenue for the development of its major islands. What made the Maldivian government to rethink its very own self-development 'Survival Plan' is not a secret. The land reclamation projects which the Chinese dredging companies are into, are paving a 'path of redemption' for Maldives from an existential environmental threat. The Chinese expertise in artificial island building can be put to good use in Maldives which will be an effective method to dodge the threats of rising sea level triggered by climate change. Several dredging companies engaged in Maldivian land reclamation projects even acquired new dredging ships for their Maldivian quest. The Maldives Transport and Contracting Company (MTCC)'s acquisition of 'The Easydredge 3700'⁸ a 36 million dollar

dredger with a hopper capacity of 3.700m³ per load is a case in point.⁹

China Senses an Opportunity

Maldives is the weakest country in the whole South Asian region, in terms of the chances of survival facing natural disasters. The Maldivian concern of an existential climate change threat is legitimate as Maldives is one of the low lying countries in the world. However being positioned in the middle of Indian Ocean, the country has a strategic advantage when it comes to monitoring the shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. The country also has an abundance of uninhabited islands; only about 200 of its 1192 islands are inhabited. This phenomenon can be turned to their advantage, as the government will have the liability to save only those inhabited islands in an immediate future and can use the other islands to facilitate the whole campaign to save those inhabited islands.

China, which has an aggressive maritime policy in South China Sea, has become an active partner in developmental tourism and land reclamation projects in Maldives; two primary activities in which Maldives puts its hope of survival. Unlike the Chinese presence in other South Asian countries, Chinese role in this partnership is not just of a financier; China is sending its money through investment portals, its people as tourists and professionals, and its military assets as protection for their investments. The Chinese developmental projects, especially the

modernization of Hulhule airport include the construction of new runways, fuel farms¹⁰ etc making the airport into a facility where Chinese military aircraft can land and refuel if the need arises.

Maldives is the only country in the region that can provide what China needs; land territory. A small uninhabited coral atoll in the region will provide China with a platform to act in the region as a regional entity. Even a small patch of land will provide it territorial waters of 12 nautical mile radius. This will provide China a regional hold in the Indian Ocean which it does not enjoy presently. Moves to sell or lease out islands from the Maldivian government will be subjected to international pressure, especially from India and United States. But if the Maldivians are gifting any of their uninhabited islands as a token of their extreme gratitude for the Chinese cooperation in land reclamation projects, India will be in a weak position to protest. Thus, a chance which Maldives may take for its survival will be an opportunity for China for their ambitions in Indian Ocean and may outflank the Indian efforts in the Indian Ocean. Chinese entry to the region with Maldivian gifted territory is not likely to herald peace. China, with sovereign territory in the region, can employ a 'South China Sea' attitude of aggressiveness in the Indian Ocean and can hinder Indian interests in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

In the recently concluded national elections, a consensus candidate of the joint opposition, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has defeated Abdulla Yameen with a clear majority. This will influence the policies of the Maldivian government, including its foreign policy and its fight against climate change. Yameen's government was supported by China, but opposition leaders who were being politically persecuted were not happy with this Chinese support and even accused that Yameen was handing over Maldives to China. The Opposition's manifesto promises to "Not give up any strategic investment of the state or main gateways of the country in a manner that disrupts Maldivian sovereignty. Such important assets should always remain under the full power of the government"¹¹. This gives a strong indication that the upcoming government will not be a ready party to China's Maldivian dreams. Still, it will not be an easy venture for the new government to shake off Chinese influence as most of the ongoing developmental and land reclamation projects have heavy investment and influence from Chinese partnership. However, Malé has only to look at the cases of Sri Lanka and other countries in Africa to figure out the repercussions of uncontrolled Chinese ingress. Can it be worth it to 'save' the country's existence but lose its territorial sovereignty? The new government in Malé has some deep thinking to do.

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(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

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⁴ Sachin Parashar, "Maldives plan to sell atoll to Saudi Arabia has India worried", *The Times of India*, March 3, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/maldives-plan-to-sell-atoll-to-saudi-arabia-has-india-worried/articleshow/57437621.cms>, accessed on September 5, 2018.

⁵ Ministry of Tourism Republic of Maldives, <http://www.tourism.gov.mv/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/July-Stats-1.jpg>, accessed on September 5, 2018.

⁶ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "Chinese company bags Maldivian Island on 50-year lease", *The Economic Times*, December 30, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/chinese-companies-bags-maldivian-island-on-50-year-lease/articleshow/56245729.cms>, accessed on September 6, 2018.

⁷ Editorial, "Island hopping — on Maldives-China FTA", *The Hindu*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/island-hopping/article21284637.ece>, accessed on September 6, 2018.

⁸ RoyalIHC, "ROYAL IHC LAUNCHES EASYDREDGE® 3700 IN CHINA FOR THE MALDIVES",

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⁹ Dredging Today.com, "MTCC's New TSHD Sets Sail for the Maldives", <https://www.dredgingtoday.com/2017/10/06/mtccs-new-tshd-sets-sail-for-the-maldives/>, accessed on September 7, 2018.

¹⁰ Col. Vinayak Bhat (Retd), "INDIA'S LOSS IN THE MALDIVES IS CHINA'S GAIN, AND IT IS SHOWING", *Indian Defence News*, September 19, 2018, <http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2018/09/indias-loss-in-maldives-is-chinas-gain.html>, accessed on September 20, 2018.

¹¹ Tara Kartha, "India shouldn't squander chance to mend ties with Maldives as Ibrahim Mohamed Solih becomes president", *First Post*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/india-gets-a-chance-to-mend-ties-as-ibrahim-mohamed-solih-wins-maldivian-presidency-new-delhi-must-not-squander-it-5248811.html>, accessed on September 24, 2018.