

# GEOSTRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE FOR ISLAND NATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF INDO-MALDIVIAN EQUATIONS

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The impact of environmental change, especially climate change on the island nations has been well-documented by the scientific community across the world. The islands could become uninhabitable due to two reasons, either by flooding or by crunch in the availability of freshwater resources. The threat of submergence is directly linked to sea-level rise caused by climate change. The availability of freshwater resources could be endangered due to various reasons, salt water intrusion being one among them. Moreover, island nations may not have the financial resources to import or build desalination units. Therefore, the two scenarios that could imperil the future of these island nations are absence of land and absence of water. The political establishments of these nation states have set the alarm bells ringing over the future of their territories and population by raising the issues of human rights and sovereignty at various international forums. Adaptation and mitigation are two legs of any country's climate change policy and these island states are no different. What separates these countries from the other countries in the world is that their domestic as well as international policies are centred on survival, security and sustainability. The possibility of their disappearance raises several pertinent questions that are

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applicable to not only the countries as nation states but also to the region in which they lie and the entire world. It has been found that environmental change could redraw the world map as well as create tensions or even opportunities of cooperation between nation states. If an entire island is wiped off the earth due to sea level rise or erosion, the resulting expansion of seas could be a source of conflicts between the major powers in the vicinity or even thousands of miles away. In fact, any body of water has been perceived by the great powers as a strategic asset that they could leverage to enhance

their sphere of influence along with interests. At the same time, the future of the whole country's population would be endangered. In addition, the concept of statehood would have to be revisited in order to establish parity. Nation states will have to come together to not only rehabilitate the people of the erstwhile islands but also to reach upon consensus regarding their 'statehood.' In such cases, statehood also becomes an inherent right of the people who could be displaced as the entire international community would be held responsible for the loss of their not only 'homeland' but also 'territorial space' to which no other nation state has any right. In this context, the geopolitical, economic, socio-cultural and legal implications of such developments are immense.

From India's perspective, the challenges are enormous. The country is already facing a series of repercussions of environmental change. Melting of glaciers, sea-level rise, subsidence, extreme weather events and destruction of ecosystems are some of them. Besides these internal challenges, it could also have to address the challenges posed by environmental change to its neighbours. Among them is the Republic of Maldives, which is in grave danger like the majority of island nations. Its ties with India are historical and in the current geopolitical scenario which is shaped by various factors including environmental change, the challenges, options and opportunities for both India and Maldives are plenty and they have to be explored. The 2012 "coup" and the current political and religious tensions in Maldives require India to take proactive steps to stabilise a region that is of pivotal

strategic interest to the latter. To say that a small island nation such as Maldives does not impinge on India's national security and strategy should be considered blasphemous especially since increasingly strategists are realising that India's strategic space lies at sea. The effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS); the settlement of the maritime boundaries and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); the displacement and resettlement of the so-called 'environmental refugees;' the redefinition of the contours of statehood and sovereignty; and the rebuilding of physical, economic, governance, socio-cultural and psychological structures are all important elements of the geopolitics of environmental change that the international community is yet to address. This paper would make an attempt to understand these concepts that have received very less attention due to their complex, unpredictable and, as of yet hypothetical nature.

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#### **IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE ON ISLAND NATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF MALDIVES**

As far as the impact of environmental change on Maldives is concerned, the country is already coping with a series of problems such as beach erosion, crunch in freshwater resources, excessive waste, sea level rise, to name just a few. According to records of the Ministry of Planning Human resources and Environment of Maldives, beach erosion has been identified as a serious issue in nearly 60 inhabited islands and many resort islands. The causes of beach erosion largely have been – coral mining, changes in the near shore current patterns due to both natural and human activities such as construction of coastal infrastructure, changes in the natural sediment balance and loss of source of sand. Coral mining has been happening in Maldives for years mostly due to the increasing demands of the tourism

and the construction industries. This is one of the major reasons for reduced protection against normal tide and wave-induced erosion by increasing water depth. It also augments the threat of storm-induced erosion and flooding which affects marine diversity, which in turn affects the coral reef fish population thereby impacting livelihoods of the fishermen. Similarly, incidents of dredging, harbour deepening, land reclamation and mining for construction materials were widely reported in Maldives during 1980s and 90s, the consequences of which are being faced in the twenty first century although presently, such activities have been regulated or banned. Pollution and overfishing have also led to stark environmental changes in the surrounding seas. The availability of freshwater resources has been constrained by high density population. For instance, in Male, due to the depletion of extensive and deep freshwater aquifers, desalination plants have been installed to supply drinking water to the residents. Similar arrangements would become a necessity in some of the islands that are heavily populated. Intrusion of saltwater is also having an adverse impact on both natural and agricultural crops.<sup>1</sup>

As far as the impact of 'climate change' on Maldives is concerned, the rising sea levels has been identified as the biggest threat that could result in beach erosion, more powerful storms, higher storm surges and threats to biodiversity. The country has around 1,200 islands and atolls having a landmass of 115 square miles. At its highest point, it is only 8 feet above sea level.<sup>2</sup> It is also an acknowledged fact that coral growth could be stunted due to the phenomena of coral bleaching and increased sea erosion, rising water temperature and ocean acidification. This in turn could imperil the coral sea-defences that are responsible for the sustenance of staple crops, like salt-sensitive mango and taro as well as forests. If the sea level rise exceeds 1.2 metres, the airport located in Male would be submerged. Besides, Male is one of the most densely populated towns in the world. This would be

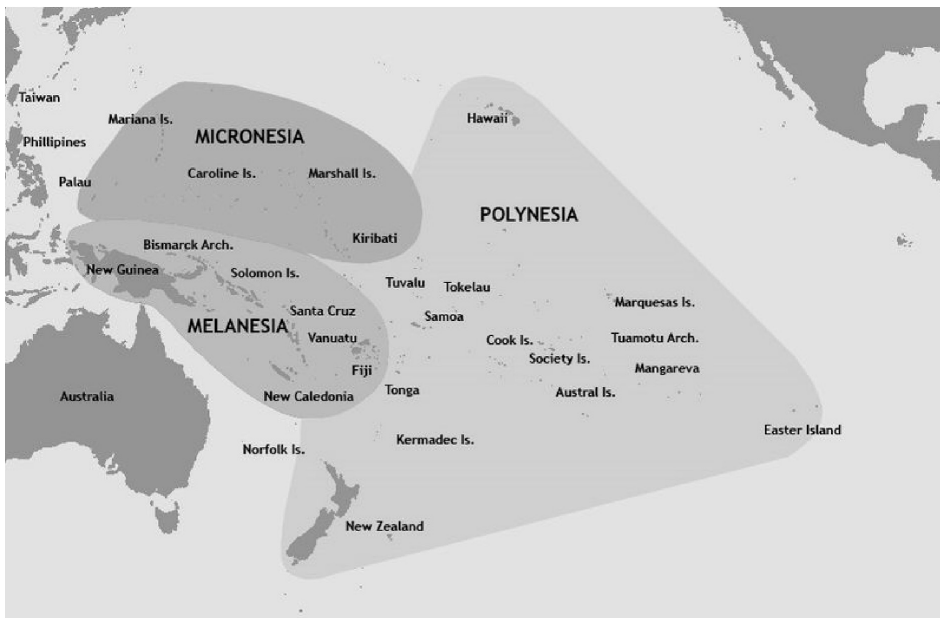
1. See for more information, "Paper 8: Environmental Changes in the Maldives: Current Issues for Management - By Mohamed Khaleel and Simad Saeed, Ministry of Planning Human Resources and Environment, Ghazee Building Malé, Republic of Maldives," available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/X5623E/x5623e0r.htm>, accessed on 13 September, 2012.
2. Justin Hoffmann, "The Maldives and Rising Sea Levels," *ICE Case Studies* (May, 2007), n. 206, see <http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/maldives.htm>, accessed on 19 September, 2012.

the biggest setback for the Maldivian economy that depends heavily on its tourism industry. If the sea level rise exceeds 2 metres, nearly 50% of Maldives is expected to be inundated.<sup>3</sup>

Similar problems are being faced by the islands in the South Pacific and the Caribbean. Tuvalu, an island nation in the Pacific, declared a state of emergency due to acute shortage of freshwater in 2011. The problem was so urgent that the freshwater supplies had already run out in some areas, especially due to poisoning of well water by the rising tides. Water supplies and desalination units were carried to Tuvalu from New Zealand as a short-term measure.<sup>4</sup> Kiribati was the first victim of submergence of uninhabited islands in 1998. Thereafter, in Vanuatu, the people of the low-lying areas were evacuated as a precaution though these islands have not disappeared till now. India was struck in 2006, when the island of Lohachara, inhabited by 10,000 people was washed off the map. The island lay in India's part of the Sundarbans. This was the first time that an inhabited island became a victim of the rising sea levels.<sup>5</sup> A dispute between India and Bangladesh over an island called the New Moore Island resolved itself when it was engulfed by the rising sea water in 2010.

**The rising temperatures are being attributed to increasing consumption of fossil fuels by the industrialised and emerging countries that in turn causes greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs)**

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3. R. K. Gupta, "Global Warming and its Effects," in R. K Gupta, Klaus Bosselmann and Prasenjit Maiti (eds.), *Global Environment: Problems and Policies* (Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd: New Delhi, 2008), vol. 3, p. 59.
  4. See, "Tuvalu declares emergency over water shortage," *BBC*, 3 October, 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15147043>, accessed on 18 September, 2012.
  5. Geoffrey Lean, "Disappearing world: Global warming claims tropical island," *The Independent* (24 December, 2006), see <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/disappearing-world-global-warming-claims-tropical-island-429764.html>, accessed on 18 September, 2012.

**Figure 1: The South Pacific Islands**

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pacific\\_Culture\\_Areas.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pacific_Culture_Areas.jpg)

The island nations have been raising their voices at international climate change negotiations to make a clarion call to the international community to come to the understanding that actions of the industrialised and emerging countries would impact them more than any other country on the surface of the earth, as it could put their very existence at risk. The rising temperatures are being attributed to increasing consumption of fossil fuels by the industrialised and emerging countries that in turn causes greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs). Not only emissions, even the garbage from other countries reach the shores of these island nations which create significant amount of environmental havoc. For instance, the trash from Europe and Africa ends up on the beaches of Antigua. In Antigua and Grenada, coastal erosion is a serious problem besides the fact that the islands have experienced unusual hurricanes in the recent past like Hurricane Ivan in 2004. The causes are not restricted to just climate change or even El Nino; these are also purported to be direct consequences of sand mining in Grenada and

large-scale developmental activities in Antigua.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE GEOPOLITICS AND GEOSTRATEGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: OPTIONS FOR MALDIVES

The geographical alterations with the disappearance of islands could have serious geopolitical and geostrategic repercussions. Two primary factors – statehood and maritime boundaries – are expected to be most seriously affected as a result of this.

The existing international laws and conventions have several loopholes especially since they do not take possible environmental change and geographical alterations into consideration. Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (1933) outlines four principles that mark the existence of a state – (a) a Government; (b) a defined territory; (c) a permanent population; and (d) a capacity to enter into relations with other states.<sup>7</sup> The question is, if the island nations get submerged or become uninhabitable in the future, will Maldives be still considered a nation state? If the islands of Maldives disappear, it is not clear if it would still be given the status of a ‘nation state’ since it would be left with no territory. If the islands do not disappear but become uninhabitable due to various reasons such as lack of freshwater resources, large-scale subsidence or frequent storm surges, even then the need for resettlement of its population becomes an international duty and responsibility. In such a case, Maldives would still have the territory (albeit uninhabited) but, in the process of resettlement, will the country still retain its political, economic and administrative structures if it is ‘forced’ to occupy other nation states’ territories? If Maldives is left without a Government, then its capacity to enter into relations with other states is questionable. Therefore, the ‘statehood’ of Maldives or any other

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6. Megan Thompson, “Message in a bottle: reporting from Antigua and Grenada,” *Worldfocus* (19 October, 2009), available at <http://worldfocus.org/blog/2009/10/19/message-in-a-bottle-reporting-from-antigua-and-grenada/7847/>, accessed on 30 September, 2012.

7. Cleo Paskal, *Global Warring: How Environmental, Economic and Political Crises will Redraw the World Map* (, Toronto: Key Porter Books 2010), p. 224.

island nation that faces similar situations would be under scrutiny. For instance, Kiribati, a Pacific Ocean country whose islands are merely five metres above sea level, in order to maintain its statehood is considering to move its population to vast floating platforms – a project expected to cost US \$2 billion.<sup>8</sup>

If the island nation is allowed to retain its structures on another country's soil, its statehood would be secured. Protecting nationhood and redrawing political boundaries would be the next step. The subtle difference between 'statehood' and 'nationhood' comes from the fact that 'statehood' is constituted by the 'citizens' and the Government machinery while 'nationhood' could also imply a group of people who share common culture, identity and language. Nationhood is a more complex concept as it permeates state boundaries. Today the majority of countries around the world are multi-ethnic and multi-religious and therefore, the integration of population of these island nations with another country's population is not expected to be difficult. Inter-mingling of nationalities has been happening for ages. However, countries have confronted enormous roadblocks in the process of integration of different nationalities and formation of a 'state.' India is one such country wherein the political and administrative machinery successfully integrated innumerable nationalities after Independence. The formation of the Indian Union was however marred by partition in the name of religion. Thus, along with citizenship, nationality would also have to be taken care of at least for the first two generations that settle on foreign territories.

Coming to Maldives, it has three main options. First, it could elevate certain part of its territory and shift all or some of its population to the elevated territory to maintain its statehood. Second, it could create an artificial island in which case the law is unclear about a nation state's rights. It would still qualify as "defined state territory for purposes of "statelessness," and may also be recognised internationally as defined territory on the basis of fairness." In addition, the permanent population

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8. Michael Field, "Kiribati considers relocating on floating platforms," see <http://michaelfield.org/Kiribati%20considers%20relocating%20on%20floating%20platforms.htm>, accessed on 17 September, 2012.



criterion has been satisfied before the United Nations by a number of people as low as 50.<sup>9</sup> Third, it could have a Government in 'exile'. If Maldives fails to exercise these options, its statehood could be lost; along with it, its territorial rights over various natural resources including fishing grounds, oil and natural gas reserves as the disappearance of the islands could lead to the conversion of their erstwhile territorial region into international waters under the UNCLOS. It is very clear that the UNCLOS has been framed for an unchanging environment and the law does not specify the line of action that could be adopted in case existing coastlines and islands vanish resulting in a change in maritime boundaries. The Convention states that a country's maritime Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends 200 nautical miles off its coastline, unless it has a continental shelf, in which case the seabed claim can be extended up to 350 miles from the coastline.<sup>10</sup> An "artificial island" can have only a 500 metres safety zone.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it may not be economically feasible to build an artificial island under the present law for statehood. Maldives could freeze its maritime boundaries to secure its EEZ and expect that no one would challenge or revise it. "The default baseline is the normal low water mark, designated in official maps, but the law allows states to set baselines using other mechanisms, such as drawing straight baselines or fixing maritime limits."<sup>12</sup> The baseline is the point from which the territorial sea is measured. If the international community decides to take the baseline as the fixed parameter depending on the low water mark, these island nations would lose their EEZs; as the coastline retreats, the low water mark retreats. If the existing baselines are fixed, the island nations' maritime zones would be fixed too irrespective of the coastal retreat. If islands disappear completely, even then this logic could be employed to freeze the political boundary.

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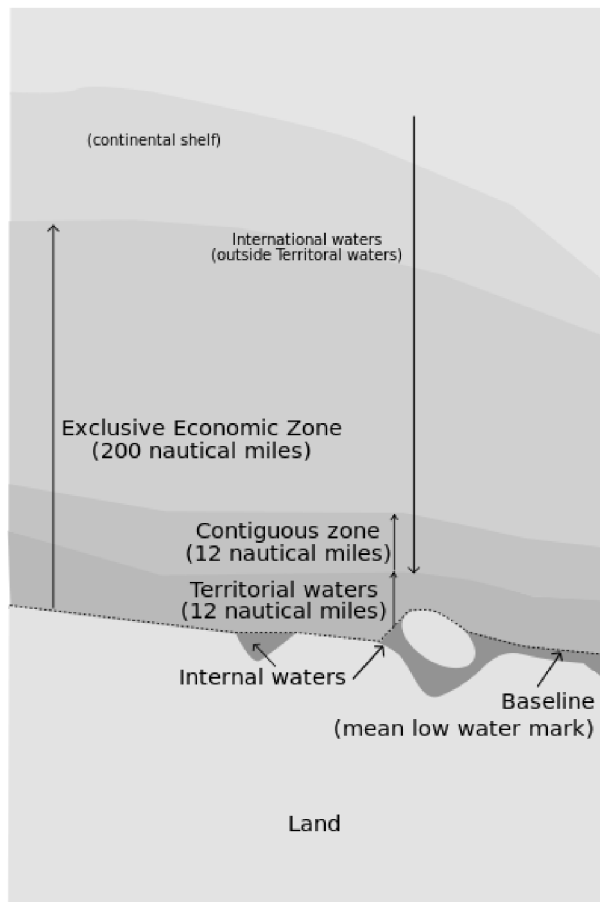
9. See, "Consolidated Notes from Threatened Island Nations: Legal Implications Of Rising Seas And A Changing Climate," May 23-25, 2011, Columbia University, p. 4, [http://www.law.columbia.edu/null/download?&exclusive=filemgr.download&file\\_id=59134](http://www.law.columbia.edu/null/download?&exclusive=filemgr.download&file_id=59134), accessed on 3 September, 2012.

10. n. 7, p. 233.

11. Cleo Paskal, "Strange case of the disappearing islands," *nzherald.co.nz* (3 April, 2010), see [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=2&objectid=10635956](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10635956), accessed on 3 October, 2012.

12. n. 9, p. 6.

**Figure 2: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea**



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Zonmar-en.svg&page=1>

The population of Maldives need not necessarily migrate to one particular country. If it is spread across various countries, it need not also necessarily have a physical Government. It could still maintain its statehood through a virtual community irrespective of where the population is, which would make their administration and the Government virtual. The usage of the terminology of 'refugee' in this context would be lop-sided in case the 'citizens' of a particular country are forced to leave their countries which would be left with just ocean waters. It has multiple connotations, mostly negative besides the inherent implications of 'human rights.' Some of them include – dependency, lack of

autonomy, statelessness, protection by international law among others. Although the UN does not recognise refugees created by environmental crises under the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR), in the future the chances of their recognition are palpable. However, it would be better not to categorise the peoples of island nations as refugees as they would be politically and economically stable, assuming they can retain rights to revenue generating mechanisms such as fisheries, internet domain registration, seabed mining, stamp production, etc. They could be provided protection under international law but their jurisdiction should be restricted to the country that offers them shelter so that they are not regarded as a 'burden.' The concept of 'stakeholder' would be a better option in which case they could hold dual citizenship – that of the island nation that would no longer exist physically and the particular country that gives them shelter. They could have an understanding with the host country's Government to hold single citizenship, that of the island nation alone and still contribute to the host country's economic development.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND INDO-MALDIVIAN EQUATIONS

Since there is no international system or law that defines the future of statehood of island states that could face extinction, these issues would probably be negotiated bilaterally. If they are not resolved bilaterally and an attempt is made to address them multilaterally, the problems would continue as the UN has so far failed at various levels on the front of global environmental governance. Furthermore, the displaced population cannot be accommodated at the UN headquarters. Even in the case of bilateral settlements, the role of the UN would be relevant, especially in recognising a new form of statehood – “a de-territorialised nation state or a nation ex-situ.”<sup>13</sup> This is crucial to maintain the UN membership of the extinct

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13. n. 9, p. 5.

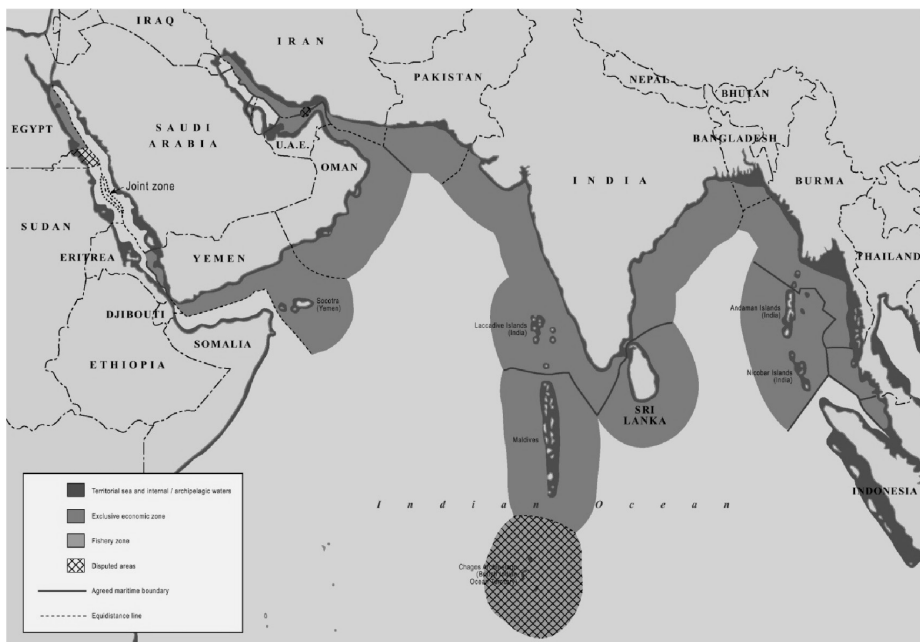
or uninhabited island nation which would allow it to wield the benefits of being a part of the international organisation. In the case of Maldives, it could strike a deal with India, one of its closest and definitely strongest neighbours. In the negotiations, the emphasis has to be laid on the needs and interests of both Maldives and India. The extinction of Maldives is a special case since the possibility of majority of the country's population migrating to India is very high, possibly making pockets of India its de facto territory. Moreover, the cause of migration is unprecedented and thus, the international community has an obligation towards these people. India could easily gain the moral high ground by welcoming Maldivians and declare to the rest of the world, especially the West how the country has shown character by taking responsibility for something it is not required to. Climate change is chiefly ascribed to the industrialised countries' uninhibited emissions during their industrialisation process. In order to bypass the categorisation of immigrants as 'refugees,' which would automatically make them 'special' under the United Nations Convention on Relating to the Status of Refugees both countries need to reach upon specific agreements. The plausible scenarios are as follows.

First, India might decide not to let the Maldivians have a Government in exile on Indian land especially due to its China experience over the Tibetan Government in exile. Instead it could provide the Maldivians the rights that any immigrant is entitled to get in terms of financial and social security. This would be rejected plainly by the Government of Maldives as this would not only mean that they would lose their statehood but also they would have to fight for their rights and for the Indian citizenship. India would get nothing in return for accommodating the Maldivian population on its land. Moreover, the chances of a Maldivian Government in exile to be an irritant for India's foreign policy are remote at this stage.

Second, India could demand for Maldivian national waters, that is Maldives' state sovereignty, in exchange for a Maldivian Government in exile on the Indian soil. The Maldivians would come to settle in India with wealth and resources and not empty-handed. Therefore, the chances of them being an economic liability is very minimal. Since Maldives' population is

just over 3 lakh the resource stress is expected to increase only marginally. In fact, the principle of sharing resources would be ideal for both countries since the Maldivian population is small and India's land is huge. If India is granted partial or collective rights over Maldivian waters, its EEZ and coastal security zone would get extended. This would mean that India and Maldives could share fishing and seabed mining rights and the proceeds of such activities could again be shared; these could specifically be used for the economic development of the Maldivian immigrants. This would also mean that India would share maritime boundary with the island of Diego Garcia (US military base).

**Figure 3: India-Maldives EEZ Map**



Source: Borders Research Unit, Durham University, UK (Courtesy Cleo Paskal)

Third, Maldives could purchase land in India as former President Mohammed Nasheed has indicated on various occasions. Even before taking power officially, he had voiced out his plan to “divert a portion of the country’s billion-dollar annual tourist revenue into buying a new homeland

– as an insurance policy against climate change that threatens to turn the 300,000 islanders into environmental refugees.”<sup>14</sup> Kiribati’s President made an unprecedented announcement in 2012 that he was holding talks with Fiji’s Government to buy up 5,000 acres of “freehold land on which his countrymen could be housed” as rising sea levels were causing many of the atolls to disappear fast.<sup>15</sup> This again is improbable in the case of Indo-Maldivian settlement as India would not like to carve out a state from its existing inhabitable land. The political repercussions would have significant bearing in a country such as India in which land acquisition itself is a huge problem. According to reliable sources, Maldives has already broached such proposals with several countries including India. What differentiates this scenario from the second one is that in the former, no specific territory would be demarcated for the Maldivian population.

A country within a country could serve the interests and purposes of both India and Maldives on the one hand. It could also prove to be a grave security threat which would be discussed later in the paper. From India’s perspective, it would give India two votes at the UN. At the same time, India has to decide how much sovereignty India could afford to give to Maldives. On the one hand, India could allow Maldives to have a separate Government and on the other, it could even create a Ministry of Maldivian Affairs to administer the pockets or areas occupied or controlled by the Maldivians. Such a ministry could be jointly handled by Indians and Maldivians with the latter forming the majority and holding the position of the Minister and it could run on trusteeship model. This would ensure that all the financial resources acquired from the extended portion of India’s EEZ would be distributed in a fair manner between both countries and would be used for the welfare of Maldivians. From the perspective of Maldives, if the second option is administered, they could always return to the islands when the

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14. Randeep Ramesh, “Paradise almost lost: Maldives seek to buy a new homeland,” *The Guardian* (10 November, 2008), see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/nov/10/maldives-climate-change>, accessed on 3 October, 2012.

15. Paul Chpaman, “Entire nation of Kiribati to be relocated over rising sea level threat,” *The Telegraph* (7 March, 2012), available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/kiribati/9127576/Entire-nation-of-Kiribati-to-be-relocated-over-rising-sea-level-threat.html>, accessed on 12 September, 2012.

islands reappear, if they do at some point of time in the future. For this, Maldives has to clearly mention this clause in the plausible agreement with India. They could also have a partially active physical trust or Government with minimum number of administering officers to administer the resources. This Government could be virtual rather than physical.

### **THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA-MALDIVES SETTLEMENT**

It is important to list out the various implications of such an arrangement, whether they are political, economic, socio-cultural or security-related. The political ones mainly arise from the internal set-up of India. First and foremost, India has to set things straight in case of displacement of people from the Lakshadweep islands that are geophysically similar to Maldives. Therefore, India's own EEZ would be affected in which case it should also actively pursue the plan to 'freeze' the borders, which would be an added incentive. The need for rehabilitation of the displaced population from these islands is undoubtedly paramount. Likewise, India also has to address the concerns of population residing on the low-lying islands and atolls of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal region.

If the first option is executed, India might have to address the fates of thousands of 'refugees' crossing over from Bangladesh. One has to keep in mind that when it comes to environmental change, the future of Bangladesh is also not very bright. It has been predicted that 45 cm of sea-level rise may inundate 10-15% of the land by the year 2050 resulting over 35 million climate refugees from the coastal districts.<sup>16</sup> Until now there has been no agreement between India and Bangladesh with regard to the management of the refugee problem which the former has been facing for decades. Signing of an Indo-Bangladesh Agreement on similar lines of the Indo-Maldivian Settlement is neither probable nor pragmatic since the immigrants from Bangladesh are expected to be much larger in number,

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16. See, "Policy Study on The Probable Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty and Economic Growth and the Options of Coping with Adverse Effect of Climate Change in Bangladesh," General Economics Division, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh & UNDP Bangladesh, p. 25, <http://www.plancomm.gov.bd/The%20probable%20impacts%20of%20climate%20change%20on%20poverty%20and%20economic%20growth%20and%20the%20options%20of%20coping%20w.pdf>, accessed on 18 September, 2012.

**The Indo-Maldivian settlement would set a dodgy precedent for the rest of the international community, particularly countries like China, which may like to claim territories**

and the chances of them being an economic liability on India are higher. Every individual state within the Indian Union has to be taken into confidence with regard to the settlement of the immigrants. The Indian states such as West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura have faced several problems with the Bangladeshi refugees over the past few decades. One has to take into consideration the fact that a significant chunk of Bangladeshi immigrants have secured the rights that an Indian has inherently by hook or by crook. They vote in the Indian elections and hold Indian ration cards and at times even Indian passports. The Maldivians would still hold ownership of the Maldivian passport co-authorised by the Indian agencies and they would vote for a Maldivian Government. If they hold dual citizenship, then they would exercise their right to vote in the Indian elections as well.

The Indo-Maldivian settlement would set a dodgy precedent for the rest of the international community, particularly countries like China, which may like to claim territories on this basis and take in the population of the extinct islands (in the South China Sea and the South Pacific Ocean). The manner in which environmental change could reshape geopolitics and international relations is unimaginable. Way back in 1988, a Chinese article said, "In order to make sure that the descendants of the Chinese nation can survive, develop, prosper and flourish in the world in the future, we should vigorously develop and use the oceans. To protect and defend the rights and interests of the reefs and islands within Chinese waters is a sacred mission....The [Spratly] Islands not only occupy an important strategic position, but every reef and island is connected to a large area of territorial water and an exclusive economic zone that is priceless."<sup>17</sup> The agreement between India's flagship oil explorer – the Oil and Natural Gas

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17. Lieutenant Michael Studeman, U.S. Navy, "Calculating China's Advances in the South China Sea Identifying the Triggers of "Expansionism," *GlobalSecurity.org* (Naval War College Review: Spring 1998), see <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1998/art5-sp8.htm>, accessed on 11 September, 2012.



Corporation – and Vietnamese firms for exploring oil and natural gas in the South China Sea sparked off fresh tensions between India and China. The islands in the South China Sea are not inhabited but are being claimed by China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam. In the case of the South Pacific islands, the equations are more complicated. China's penetration in the region is immense. According to reports, China's business investments and surprisingly military assistance to countries such as Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and Papua New Guinea are steadily increasing, so much so that their economies are heavily dependent on Chinese investments as well as Chinese migrants. Many analysts have even suggested that the South Pacific Ocean has the potential to turn into a theatre of Cold War between the US and China with the US' dominance in the region waning and China's influence rising rapidly.<sup>18</sup> Scepticism has seeped into these countries' ties with countries such as Australia and New Zealand, which were obvious allies or partners earlier due to their heavy-handed approach. Even a country such as New Zealand offered Tonga aid for a solar power plant on the precondition that the plant would be built only by a New Zealand government-owned company which goes against the principles of no tied aid. If there is no competitive bidding, the costs of energy are expected to rise, which the economy of Tonga might not be able to withstand in the long-term.<sup>19</sup> China even ran a Space Monitoring Station in Kiribati (since closed down). In 2011, one of the US territories, Northern Mariana offered to lease out up to ten of its territory's uninhabited islands to China to fight the growing unemployment in the country.<sup>20</sup> The US acquired these territories during the Second World War due to their

**Many analysts have even suggested that the South Pacific Ocean has the potential to turn into a theatre of Cold War between the US and China**

18. Bertil Lintner, "The Sinicizing of the South Pacific," *Asia Times* 18 April, 2007, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/ID18Ad02.html>, accessed on 18 September, 2012.

19. Cleo Paskal, "Why the West is Losing the Pacific to China, the Arab League, and Just about Everyone Else," *Huffington Post* (24 November, 2010), see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cleo-paskal/why-the-west-is-losing-th\\_b\\_786668.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cleo-paskal/why-the-west-is-losing-th_b_786668.html), accessed on 18 September, 2012.

20. Available at "South Pacific: U. S. Territory Offers to Lease Surplus Islands to China," 27 October, 2011, <http://www.privateislandnews.com/south-pacific-u-s-territory-offers-to-lease-surplus-islands-to-china/>, accessed on 30 September, 2012.

strategic locations for military bases. China has made its mark in every nook and corner of the world and it could very well decide to take complete control of these islands under any circumstances, even environmental change. Interestingly, China's allies such as Tonga has quite a few mountainous islands that are not likely to be affected by climate change while the US' allies such as the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia are low-lying and are therefore highly susceptible.<sup>21</sup> In the Asia-Pacific strategy of the US, these island nations are expected to find prominent position. In 2012, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton visited Rarotonga (Cook Islands) to attend the meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and interestingly remarked that "the Pacific was big enough for everyone, including the European Union (EU), Canada, the UK and China" and that she was looking for an "American model of partnership."<sup>22</sup> The politics of climate aid is especially expected to gain momentum in this part of the world with all these potential stakeholders' (including Russia) keenness to pump money into these economies and compete for strategic space.

The security-related threats of the Indo-Maldivian agreement need to be investigated. The percolation of Wahhabi elements and ultra-conservative ideology into the Maldivian society is being looked at with lot of interest by India as this could directly impact India's national security. The involvement of Pakistani terrorist groups such as Lashker-e-Taiba in the country has raised concerns for India. Moreover, incidents involving hard-line Islamists are on the rise in Maldives such as the attack on the Buddhist statues in the Maldives National Museum or forced closure of massage parlours and spas during the so-called coup in 2012. The same Indian Government that intervened and averted a coup in 1988 in Maldives when a 'dictator', Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was in power, this time chose to remain neutral and watch the drama unfold in the island country. The democratically elected Mohammed Nasheed was replaced by Dr. Mohammed Waheed, his running mate in the historic 2008 elections with the help of the police

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21. n. 7, p. 239.

22. Luke Hunt, "The World's gaze Turns to the South Pacific," *The Diplomat* (4 September, 2012), available at <http://thediplomat.com/2012/09/04/the-worlds-gaze-turns-to-the-south-pacific/>, accessed on 30 September, 2012.

forces, the armed forces and quite evidently the religious fundamentalists who were on the streets raising slogans against former President Nasheed while he resigned reportedly “at gunpoint.” This decision could be a result of cumulative reasons. First, the Indian intelligence agencies might have failed to gauge the volatile situation in Maldives. Second, India might have perceived the “coup” as a consequence of internal instability within the ruling party. Third, India might have faced moral dilemma in terms of supporting either of the two leaders considering that there was no outright endorsement by Dr. Waheed of his association with elements that could be deemed security threats to the nation. Whichever may be the case, the Government of India received flak and to add insult to injury, stories about firm backing of the new President by fundamentalist elements in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia began to surface.<sup>23</sup> Very clearly, for any settlement between the two countries, the democratic credentials of Maldives have to be restored and radicalised units have to be flushed out. This in fact would be the biggest roadblock for any form of cooperation between the two countries especially since India’s ties with the Nasheed Government were considered extremely cordial. When the two countries reach an agreement, they have to create mechanisms by which such elements could be filtered and not allowed to enter India. Besides, enabling smooth amalgamation of the Maldivian way of living with the Indian way of living by building bridges becomes crucial.

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China’s influence in Maldives is also well-documented, so much so that it had approached Maldives with the proposal to help the latter build a naval (submarine) base at Marao. China’s decision to establish a full-fledged embassy as well as grab several development projects in Maldives has also

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23. Suman Sharma, “US fear stopped Indian armed action in Maldives,” *The Sunday Guardian* (12 February, 2012), available at <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/us-fear-stopped-indian-armed-action-in-maldives>, accessed on 12 September, 2012.

reportedly created panic among the Indian security establishment.<sup>24</sup> Couple of days later, India's Defence Minister, A. K. Antony publicly claimed that "the Indian Navy has been mandated to be a net security provider to island nations in the Indian Ocean region."<sup>25</sup> Maldives has been actively engaging with both countries to fulfil their national interests. It is imperative for India to make its stand clear to Maldives regarding China's role in the region. Maldives should be allowed to continue to engage with China at the level in which India engages with the latter to respect the "country within a country" principle and one of the criteria of the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States. However, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of India has to be respected. For example, Maldives cannot let China build infrastructure on Indian soil without India's green signal, if the designated area is controlled by Maldivians. Similarly, if the Government of Maldives is going to be virtual, the voters residing in other countries should not be allowed to vote on an issue that concerns India.

Economically, both countries are expected to be in a win-win position. The possibility of extension of India's EEZ in exchange for Maldives' statehood is a good proposition that could serve both countries' interests. India could fulfil the financial requirements of the Maldivians from the revenue raised from the Maldivian waters by creating a Maldives Fund. The economic activities of Maldivians would augment the overall growth of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The 'stakeholder' principle would imply that all the revenues and profits would be shared equitably. Socio-culturally, it is very important that the Maldivians are not forced to get rid of their sense of identity since the entire international community would be somewhere down the line responsible for the submergence of the islands. India has to create flexible systems for them to adapt to the Indian society. The differences between the Indians and Maldivians (in

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24. Rajat Pandit, "China's stepped up moves in Maldives worry India," *Times of India* (10 October, 2011), available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-10/india/30262896\\_1\\_indian-military-surveillance-systems-ins-tillanchang-maldives](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-10/india/30262896_1_indian-military-surveillance-systems-ins-tillanchang-maldives), accessed on 18 September, 2012.

25. Sujat Datta, "India takes on ocean-cop role, tests China," *The Telegraph* (Calcutta: 13 October, 2011), available at [http://telegraphindia.com/1111013/jsp/frontpage/story\\_14618394.jsp#](http://telegraphindia.com/1111013/jsp/frontpage/story_14618394.jsp#), accessed on 18 September, 2012.

this context, the liberal ones) are not that stark and the latter are said to have close connections with the former in a number of spheres. The earliest settlers are in fact said to be from South India. Ethnically called Dhivehis, they are said to be related to the people in the Indian subcontinent ethnically and linguistically. In order to make assimilation or integration easier, India has to wait till the second or third generation is born which would have closer links with the Indian society than the first generation. Instead of dual or single citizenship, the two countries could propose a hybrid citizenship, that is, Indo-Maldivian citizenship for the first generation. The subsequent generations could choose their citizenship. Also, preservation of their language and culture should be given as much priority as that of the cultures and languages of India. This would create goodwill among Maldivians and their integration with the Indian society could become effortless without conflicts. This is easier said than done especially with the changing societal dynamics of Maldives. Therefore, before any decision is made, the first and foremost task would be to conduct an in-depth study of the Maldivian society and its requirements.

#### **CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVES AND SOLUTIONS**

Besides an arrangement with India, Maldives has other options. Before finalising such an arrangement, as already discussed, several hurdles have to be crossed both regionally and internationally. With the change in maritime boundaries the claims and counter-claims over the ocean waters of Maldives would increase, especially if they are declared international waters. For instance, the US may like the ocean waters of Maldives to be declared international waters as they have a base on Diego Garcia, an island located at a distance of less than 800 miles from Maldives. They could extend their influence into these waters as well. The US has always believed in the idea of 'freedom of the seas' because of which they have not even signed the UNCLOS. However, emerging powers such as China and even India with their blue navy ambitions may not let the US dominate the seas as before as changing geopolitics has changed the equations between the US and the rest of the world.

The Maldivian population could migrate to other countries such as the Arab countries, Sri Lanka or Australia (because of the large stretch of unoccupied land). However, the Maldivian culture is closest to India and Sri Lanka with similar traditions, cuisines and climates. India is expected to be the most-favoured option among the two due to the greater degree of opportunities available in the country. India's involvement in staving off the coup way back in the late eighties brought the two nations together. Moreover, the people-to-people contact has flourished over years. Hundreds of Maldivians flock to India every year for cheap, quality medical treatment. Factors such as lifestyle, cost of living and demographics would also play a major role in possible arrangements between India and Maldives. However, India has to tackle the anti-India sentiments among a section of the Maldivian polity that deems India the 'big brother.' It would be interesting to see how China might react in such a scenario. Maldives is one of the keystones of China's policy in the Indian Ocean region. Hence, the possibility of opposition from China to an Indo-Maldivian arrangement is quite credible and substantial. India has to help its neighbours understand why it is a better long term partner than China.

There is yet another possibility of corporations trying to give shelter to people and own a country in case an artificial island is created. If corporations begin to own statehood, they would have omnipotent rights and powers which they could exploit for private profits, which in turn could create international instability. As Cleo Paskal comments, "That statehood could then be sold off to corporations who could then literally become sovereign, writing laws under which they flag ships, bank, run telecoms, sell arms, etc, with the impunity and immunity of statehood."<sup>26</sup> This is a probable scenario in case an island nation faces trouble environmentally or even financially.

From all the arguments and counter-arguments, it is very clear that there is dire need to alter or create new legal infrastructure so that sovereignty is redefined or recreated in a different form. If bilateralism has to be averted in favour of multilateralism, the legal fraternity has to

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26. n. 11.

look at the seas with a fresh outlook and redraw the legal boundaries to avoid conflicts or even wars. Interestingly, the small island state of Palau made its move to seek International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on climate change in 2011.<sup>27</sup> The major powers such as the US, China and India are in search of potential geostrategic commercial and military bases. Environmental change has opened up new vistas of opportunities for these powers to exploit the inevitability of the impacts of such a change on the island nations. The island nations also need to pull up their socks to face the worst impacts of environmental change and not wait for the legal authority to come to their rescue. To defend their sovereignty, they have to deal with 'receptive' countries. They have spoken with a common voice at all the climate change negotiations. They have had striking differences with the industrialised and emerging countries over the rising temperatures and reduction of carbon emissions. Maldives, unlike India, has always pressed for a legally binding agreement and a temperature rise to well below 1.5°C. Former President Nasheed, gave a rousing speech at Copenhagen in which he reiterated, "Carbon concentrations higher than 350 parts per million, and temperature rises above 1.5 degrees, will submerge my country, dissolve our coral reefs, turn our oceans to acid and destabilise the planet's climate." He continued, "For global emissions to peak by 2015 as science demands, industrialised countries must raise their level of ambition. They must commit to collective reductions of 40% by 2020, and 95% by 2050. But developing countries must also do their bit. The rich world may have caused the climate crisis, by filling our atmosphere with pollution. But two wrongs don't make a right. Developed countries created the climate crisis; developing countries must not turn it into a calamity."<sup>28</sup> Their role in securitisation of the climate change issue is instrumental. They openly endorsed the Western powers' attempts to push for a deal that

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27. See, "Palau Plans to Seek ICJ Advisory Opinion on Climate Change," 26 September, 2011, available at <http://internationallawobserver.eu/2011/09/26/palau-plans-to-seek-icj-advisory-opinion-on-climate-change/>, accessed on 18 September, 2012.

28. See, "Maldives President pleads for climate action," [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/23/content\\_12098838.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/23/content_12098838.htm), accessed on 12 September, 2012.

would require the developing countries to cut emissions under a legally binding mechanism by taking the issue to the United Nations Security Council twice (2007 and 2011). It is time for them to stop entangling themselves in the labyrinth of debates since the debates are expected to take their own course depending on how different countries define their national interests. Meanwhile, the island nations have to protect their national interests themselves.