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India-Maldives Ties - Beyond the Ballot

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On October 1, 2023, India's South Asian maritime neighbour, the Maldives, elected its new president, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu. He is the fourth Head of the State since Male made the transition to multiparty democracy in 2008. Dr. Muizzu belongs to the People's National Congress (PNC) and was the erstwhile opposition leader in alliance with the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM).¹ The President-elect will replace the incumbent, Ibrahim Mohammed Solih of the ruling Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), on November 17, 2023. Any change of government in India's neighbourhood is of particular relevance and importance for New Delhi, both due to the historical past and geographical realities and the present-day encroaching of strategic space by China in India's neighbourhood, both for development and strategic purposes. The pro-Indian stance of the incumbent Solih administration and the pro-China policy of the Yameen administration (2013-2018) have made the India-Maldives ties appear like a pendulum oscillating from pro-India to anti-India. This regimental change blurred the picture of the relationship. The New Delhi–Male ties need to be understood beyond the ballot and change in governments in Majlis, especially at a time when there is a brouhaha across the circles and community that the coming of Dr. Muizzu is seen as a setback for Indian diplomacy in the island nation.

Flip-flop between India and China

India's role in the archipelago is not two or three elections old. In fact, New Delhi was one of the first countries to recognise Maldives as an independent country in 1965 and opened its embassy in the 1980s, as compared to China, which opened its mission in 2011. China's role, both diplomatically and developmentally, got a push under the Yameen government, which signed a Free Trade Agreement with Beijing, entered into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), leased islands, and allowed Beijing to play an active role economically and diplomatically in the country. Of course, Maldives needs development, but this should not come at the cost of unsustainable debts. In relative terms, after Angola and Djibouti, Maldives is the third highest debtor to China. The small island nation owes a sum that is almost equal to 30 per cent of its gross national income.² Most of this comes from the Yameen administration when the government was dancing to the tune of the Chinese diktats.

Compared to China, which infringes upon New Delhi's interests by undertaking gigantic infrastructure projects, India's role in Maldives is much deeper, and cooperation is wider. Ranging from diplomacy and capability building, information dominance, military cooperation, and economic engagement, India has played a pivotal role in the development of the Maldives. New Delhi's role is significant in developing high-impact community development projects, surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), training the Maldivian defence forces, and striking

institutional engagements. As the Maldivian foreign minister Abdulla Shahid proclaimed in one of his addresses during his recent visit to New Delhi, India always responds to Male's emergency bugle.³ In fact, Maldives was one of the many countries that congratulated India for its successful Chandrayaan landing. This achievement will advance the cause of scientific and human progress, tweeted President Solih.⁴

Global Spotlight and Male's Dilemma

The headlines that particularly captured global attention with the newly elected President Muizzu were his remarks about the removal of the foreign military from Maldives.⁵ This action has been picked up very quickly by the strategic community as being anti-India and pro-China. Apparently, India is the only country whose forces are stationed in Maldives to operate the two light combat helicopters, Dhruva and a Dornier aircraft. These aircraft have been used for surveillance of the EEZ and to address medical emergencies across the islands and have saved several lives over the years. On this issue, the Indian side very optimistically mentioned its engagement with the new administration in Maldives on all such issues. It must be noticed that despite Muizzu joining the anti-India campaign, he mentioned having a balanced relationship between India and China.⁶ This puts the ball in Male's court, and walking a tightrope between India and China will be a necessity for any leader who comes to power.

India's Options

Located to the west of the southern tip of India, the archipelago of Maldives is significant for India from geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic factors. India has been an all-weather friend of Maldives despite the COVID-19, Ukraine war, and global economic slowdown. New Delhi continues to be the largest development partner of Male.⁷

With the rising tension between the US and China and between India and China in the Indian Ocean, Maldives will remain on the cusp of both opportunities and challenges. The evolving security landscape in the Indian Ocean is further drawing other powers like Japan, the United Kingdom, Russia, and France to assert their influence more actively. This puts Maldives in the right set of circumstances to internationalise its partnership with regional and distant powers.

At the same time, it will test Male's balancing act and its ability to manage ties with major regional actors. Concomitantly, in any of the emerging matrixes, India, being a residential and a proximate power, is likely to be impacted significantly. The push and pull by the major powers for

strategic purposes necessitates that New Delhi enjoy a comfortable juncture with any government in power. To further continue its developmental role in Male, enjoying support from all the political parties through backchannel diplomacy or otherwise will act as a resistance mechanism amidst the jolts of great power competition in the Maldives. Dealing with the political parties across the spectrum will help in ending the cycle of pro- and anti-India policy and catapult India's role in its neighbourhood and the larger Indian Ocean.

NOTES:

¹ "Dr Mohamed Muizzu wins Presidential elections in Maldives", *All India Radio*, October 01, 2023, <https://newsonair.gov.in/News?title=Dr-Mohamed-Muizzu-wins-Presidential-elections-in-Maldives&id=468671>. Accessed on October 06, 2023.

² Katharina Buchholz, "The Countries Most In Debt To China", *Forbes*, August 19, 2022, [The Countries Most In Debt To China \[Infographic\] \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com/infographic/the-countries-most-in-debt-to-china/). Accessed on October 06, 2023.

³ "Whenever we dialled international emergency number India has been first responder: Maldives Foreign Minister Shahid", *The Print*, July 12, 2023, <https://theprint.in/world/whenever-we-dialled-international-emergency-number-india-has-been-first-responder-maldives-foreign-minister-shahid/1666767/>. Accessed on October 07, 2023.

⁴ "Maldives pres congratulates India on historic moon landing", *Atoll Times*, August 20, 2023, [Maldives pres congratulates India on historic moon landing | Atoll Times](https://www.atolltimes.com/maldives-pres-congratulates-india-on-historic-moon-landing/). Accessed on October 07, 2023.

⁵ "Maldives pro-China winner to eject Indian troops", *The Times of India*, October 05, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/maldives-pro-china-winner-to-eject-indian-troops/articleshow/104137570.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on October 07, 2023.

⁶ P.K. Balachandran, "Maldivian President Muizzu Plans To Balance India And China Ties – Analysis", *Eurasia Review*, October 02, 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/02102023-maldivian-president-muizzu-plans-to-balance-india-and-china-ties-analysis/>. Accessed on October 08, 2023.

⁷ Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, "Capacity building Maldivian civil servants: a new chapter in the India-Maldives relations", *Public Information Bureau*, November 11, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1875361>. Accessed on October 10, 2023.