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### Change of Regime in Maldives: Why India Matters?

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On November 17, 2023, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu took oath as the fourth Head of the State of Maldives since the country made the transition to multiparty democracy in 2008. In the elections, which spanned over two months, September and October 2023, the former Mayor of Male, Muizzu, defeated the incumbent and pro-Indian President Solih. Post the swearing-in ceremony, the headlines that caught the global attention across media houses and social media platforms were about the request of the new President for the removal of the Indian military and its implications on the India-Maldives ties. However, before delving deeper, it must be understood that any relationship between two countries is like a marriage, and thus, it requires the efforts of both partners to sail through challenging times. Similarly, as much as New Delhi requires Male for strategic, political, and economic reasons, Maldives also benefits from India's partnership to sail through the stormy waters of the Indian Ocean.

With the coming of a pro-Chinese leader at the helm of affairs in the Maldives, one of the primary political agendas of the new President after winning was the removal of India's military from Maldivian soil. It was further confirmed during his first meeting with the Indian High Commissioner, Munu Mahawar, where the latter handed over a congratulatory note from Prime Minister Modi. The message from the Indian side was clear yet subtle: New Delhi looks forward to productive discussions that further enhance the bilateral ties, take the relations beyond the ballot, and ensure they are not overshadowed by the change in government. However, the same perspicuity was not conveyed by Muizzu, who threw the ball in the Indian court by raising two primordial concerns with the High Commissioner. The first issue was the continuity of the promise on which his political party was campaigning, i.e., the removal of the Indian military personnel from Maldivian soil. Since India has been the largest developmental partner of the Maldives, the second élan vital component of the conversation was about negotiating the debt component with India. While the new government has just taken over in Maldives, the implications of the clamour must be looked at deeply.

### **India: A Critical and Reliable Proximate Power in the Indian Ocean**

The entry of the African Union in the G-20, at a time when global politics is undergoing its toughest and roughest phase, is a testament to the Indian efforts of not only ensuring its rise in the Global North but also taking together the Global South. This confirms India's commitment to taking along its friends and partners as its credence and credibility magnifies amidst difficult times. This can be seen in India's fidelity to its neighbours with whom it shares civilizational and deep people-to-people

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connections and practices the neighbourhood-first policy. The relevance of this in India-Maldives ties was reflected in India's active support of Abdulla Shahid's candidacy for the President of the 76<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly.

Being more realistic and pragmatic, despite the rise of regional powers and the increasing presence of extra-regional players in the Indian Ocean, India is the most reliable proximate player cum friend of Maldives. The substantiality of geographical closeness is such that no other country can replace or match. From preventing the coup in 1988 to rushing aid and relief during the tsunami of 2004 to providing the Covishield vaccine during the pandemic and having an air bubble arrangement to revive the tourism-based economy of Maldives, India has been the first to respond to the Maldivian needs. Not only was New Delhi the first to various firsts of Male, but these firsts were also without any strings attached.

Speaking of economic engagement and developmental projects, India's ties are based on creating the bonds of interdependence, not dependence. In this context, India's role is often matched with that of Chinese dollar by dollar. But it is important to understand that India might not have built gigantic infrastructure projects like those by China in the recent past. However, India is leading in undertaking high-impact community development projects like fish processing plants, drug detoxification centres, installing street lights, procuring sea ambulances, development of outdoor gyms, establishing ice plants, speech therapy units, multi-sporting complexes, school digitization programs, and many more.<sup>1</sup> Initiatives like these can uplift every Maldivian and improve the quality of life.

As the security architecture of the IOR becomes more complex and interdependent to deal with inter-state issues and non-traditional challenges, a collaborative approach will be required. Issues such as piracy, sea-based terrorism, climate change, irregular migration, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU) require the support of all and not the hands of a few. In this context, India's role as a residential player, with its ability to collect intelligence and data, wider surveillance capacity, and dissemination structure, has a quintessential significance. To this end, India's effort to lead the Colombo Security Conclave, a maritime security grouping of which Maldives is one of the active members, apart from other Indian Ocean neighbours, is laudable.

Last but not least, in the changing and emerging geopolitical scenario, as Maldives seeks to internationalise its partnerships, India's embrace of strategic autonomy and cultivating ties across North-South and East-West will add more to Maldives' role and voice in global politics. For instance, at a moment when QUAD members are seeking to drive an 'Indo' focus of their Indo-Pacific strategy

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by strengthening their role in the island countries of South Asia like Maldives bilaterally and multilaterally, India's role as a leading player in QUAD multilaterally and its clasp with the member countries bilaterally will feed into the dynamics, and vice-versa.<sup>2</sup>

As Dr. Muizzu has just stepped into Maldives' Presidential shoes, he must walk step by step and not miss the forest for trees. As he seeks to build, maintain, and sustain partnerships across the region and beyond, Maldives' ties with its closest maritime neighbour, India, will be watched out for by the various regional and extra-regional players. Amidst the jolts of great power competition in the IOR, its balancing skills could be put to test. It remains to be seen how Maldives will navigate through tumultuous times without putting one country against another and affecting its ties with either.

#### NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> High Commission of India, "India-Maldives High Impact Community Development Projects", July 2023, <https://hci.gov.in/male/?pdf17749>. Accessed on November 10, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Monish Tourangbam, "India-U.S. '2+2' Dialogue: Towards a Partnership for All Seasons", *India Times*, November 12, 2023, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-us22-dialogue-towards-a-partnership-for-all-seasons-620401.html>. Accessed on November 20, 2023.