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Entailment of Maldives' Actions Against India

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The year 2024 is a significant year for the South Asian subcontinent. Most of the countries in the region have either gone or are scheduled to go through a bout of an electoral overhaul in the year 2024. Amidst all the changes, what impacted India the most happened in the penultimate month of 2023. In November 2023, the coalition of People's National Congress (PNC) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) won the election in Maldives on the backs of a campaign that was largely anti-India. Mohamed Muizzu took over as the 8th President of the Maldives.¹ So far, his foreign policy has demonstrated and verified what optics held about his pro-China and anti-India stance.² To this end, the utter disrespectful and derogatory remarks by the three deputy ministers from the Muizzu's government against the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while the latter was in Lakshadweep sent signals of Maldives' emerging cast of mind of treating Male versus New Delhi, instead of Male and New Delhi. This was further reinforced by President Muizzu's five-day visit to China which began on January 08, 2024, where he was seen predicating Beijing as the 'closest ally'³, 'integral collaborator', and 'closest development partner'⁴ of Male.

The new president has visited Turkey⁵ as his first overseas destination after taking office in November 2023. The visit to China can be seen as another quantum leap in this direction. It has been a standing tradition for any Head of the State of Maldives to visit New Delhi first. This also includes Yameen, who had set the stage for an anti-India movement in Maldives and began to play the Chinese card by signing up for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). However, Muizzu is not leaving any stone unturned to display his staunch anti-India perspective. Maldives also skipped the Colombo Security Conclave (a trilateral initiative initially between India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives) meeting at the NSA level in December 2023.⁶ However, simultaneously quite an active participation was seen from the Maldives at the Vice-Presidential level in the second China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, a Chinese led institutional engagement in the IOR.⁷

In another incident, Sri Lanka refused entry to the so-called Chinese research vessels in its waters, believed to have strategic interests and engage in espionage on India, after India objected to it. The same request by India went unnoticed by Muizzu's government in Maldives, and a green signal has been given to the Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 3.⁸ Last but not least, setting March 15, 2024, as the deadline for the withdrawal of the Indian troops from Maldives, who have been operating the two Dhruva helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, has added strains in the

relationship. All the above scenes in the Maldives' script, with India and China as the protagonists, point to two important takeaways.

The upshot of Maldives' Script with India

First, repeated attempts by the Maldives to limit its engagement and involvement with India, at the same time taking this forward by enhancing China's role at the forefront. India has been an umbilical sibling of Maldives with whom the relationship has been based on mutual trust, faith, and respect. In addition to this, India's approach and policy have always been to win the hearts and minds of Maldivians. Whether it was helping Maldivians reach the capital, Male, from different islands via gifted helicopters⁹, providing them with drinking water in 2014¹⁰ or offering food and medical aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being a considerate neighbour, India was the first country to have an air bubble arrangement during the pandemic and helped reboot its economy. According to the Ministry of Tourism of Maldives, Indians have been topping the list of tourists in Male in the post-COVID times, with their share nearly doubling to 11 per cent in five years.¹¹ Second, there is a clear indication of Maldives gasping for more economic oxygen, thus an expression of over-dependence on China and maintaining of cordial ties with the West Asian countries.

Muizzu took over at a time when the Maldivian economy was neck-deep in crisis and still coping to stay afloat after the pandemic amidst the global economic slowdown. Tourism and fishery, which are the twin pillars of its growth, are hanging in limbo and struggling to maintain the pre-COVID numbers. While the white sand beaches and the basking sun are still awaiting more tourists, the fishing sector faces challenges in sales and delayed payments, difficulties in acquiring ice and fuel, obstacles in using satellite phones, and banking limitations.¹² The economic situation is further deteriorated by increasing debt-to-GDP ratio that has reached an all-time high of 110% of the Maldivian GDP.¹³ According to the World Bank report from January to August 2023, the debt servicing payment, which includes the interest and capital, has gone up by 15% and accounts for US\$ 162.3 million, nearly double what was paid from 2014 to 2019.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Muizzu administration is pulling all its strings to expand the infrastructure projects that are extremely high in cost and go beyond the paying capacity of Maldivians.

India's Support to the Maldives: What is at stake for the Island Nation?

The Maldives' increasing dependence on China needs to take into consideration the examples of other nations in its close neighbourhood. The world witnessed the ease with which the gigantic infrastructure projects such as the airports and seaports were accepted with open arms by

the Sri Lankans and how they fell like a deck of cards out of the control of the Lankans themselves. Further, how New Delhi went out of its way to help Colombo deal with the crisis, which was beyond its absorbing capacity. In the case of Maldives too, the World Bank cautioned in October 2023 about getting too romantic with China, which could spell trouble in Maldives as it owes nearly 20 per cent of its public debt to the latter.¹⁵ Hence, before getting absorbed in China's chequebook and debt trap diplomacy, the Maldives must not ignore the red signals and be more cautious.

By embracing China and giving more grounds to Beijing, Maldives is inviting greater instability in the IOR in a second-handed way due to the geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic significance of the Indian Ocean, many distant and proximate powers today are involved in this part of the larger Indo-Pacific region. China's estranged relationship with many of the significant players like the U.S., U.K., Japan, Australia, and others will feed into its dynamics with regional countries and bring increasing competition and confrontation to this region too. For instance, the U.S. has raised concerns over Chinese spying activities through its so-called research vessels in the IOR.¹⁶ In future, an enhanced Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean waters by the regional powers will ultimately make the region a playground for greater power competition.

Further, looking with a focal lens on a larger canvas, the ultimate sufferers are the Maldivians who enjoy deep people-to-people connections and civilisational ties with Indians. Indian aid and assistance over the years have helped in building the Maldivian society, economy, and security. India's role in High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) such as establishing prosthetics and orthotics manufacturing workshops, drug detoxification centres, creating tourism zones in several islands, and procuring sea ambulances is worth mentioning.¹⁷ In addition to this, being a proximate neighbour, India has assisted Maldivians in conducting the surveillance of their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that has helped them deal with various non-traditional challenges, and offered cheap medical treatment in India all of which has helped advance the interests of Male at all times.

To conclude, despite Muizzu's tilt towards China in recent times, the winning of a pro-India candidate at the recently concluded mayoral elections in Male shows the trust and faith of common Maldivian people in India's roles and its significance in the future economic development. The wining of pro-India candidate, Adam Azim from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) validates the proximity between Maldivians and Indians, which Muizzu will not be able to brush aside.¹⁸ Thus, having said all, it's time for Dr Muizzu to make the right calculations, and consequently, the right

choices to make sure not only the Maldives remain secure, stable, and prosperous, but also the IOR remains free, open, and prosperous.

NOTES:

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