

Changing contours of India-Maldives relations

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ABSTRACT

India's growing inclination towards the Indian Ocean region makes Maldives a significant neighbour for reinforcing its image and accomplishing its national interest. The significance of Maldives for India's foreign policy discourse lies as it is the immediate maritime neighbour, the Maldives archipelago comprising 1200 coral islands lies next to key shipping lanes. India-Maldives relations largely remain close, cordial and multi-dimensional. However, foreign policy being dynamic and multidisciplinary is influenced by numerous determinants. Likely, India-Maldives relations are also influenced by the internal politics of Maldives, China's increasing interests in the Indian Ocean, and regional and global geopolitics. This paper examines the changing contours of India-Maldives relations, especially after the formation of a new coalition government in Maldives headed by Muizzu. It also examines how the Maldives' bonhomie with China affects India-Maldives relations. India being a benign and undeniable actor in the Indian Ocean region has unveiled numerous initiatives like the Neighbourhood First policy, SAGAR, Project Mausam, Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiatives etc. to reduce trust deficit with littoral states in the region and enable it to leverage the benefit of its strategic location as well. This paper also provides insight into what foreign policy stance India should opt to maintain cordiality about the Maldives and the peaceful Indian Ocean region.

Keywords: - Indian Ocean, SAGAR, Geopolitics, Strategic, Maldives.

INTRODUCTION

The Maldives, a tiny island in the Indian Ocean region, is an important actor in the current power game in the Indo-Pacific. Maldives vitality to India lies mainly due its strategic location, as it is India's key maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean region and holds a significant position in the SAGAR initiative and the Modi Neighbourhood First policy (Deccan Herald, 2024). Kumar even highlighted that the strategic location of Maldives, positioned at the critical junction of international shipping lanes and sea lines of communications (SLOCs) through which two-thirds of the world's oil and half its container shipment pass, makes it a critical actor in the Indian Ocean geopolitics generally and for India's maritime security policy particularly (Kumar, 2023). Notwithstanding with this, another key factor that strengthens the ties is the geographical proximity, the Republic of Maldives is a tiny island state located in the Indian Ocean on the southern coast of India and south-west of Sri Lanka. Naturally, India and Sri Lanka are their immediate neighbours (Basu, 2002).

Moreover, the attraction of the Maldives in India's foreign policy discourse lies in the fact that India to leverage the virtue of its strategic geographical location at the heart of the Indian Ocean, the Indian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi, has laid out a comprehensive framework for India's engagement in its maritime neighbourhood (Chaturvedy, 2017). This increasing inclination towards the maritime neighbourhood and most particularly the Maldives traces its logic from the most renowned geopolitician Alfred Thomas Mahan. He held that 'whoever controls the Indian Ocean region dominates Asia in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided on these waters' (Mahan, 2013). Contributing towards the same logic, David Brewster even suggested that any strategy of interdicting those SLOCs across the northern Indian Ocean by any country would likely require the use of that island (Brewster, 2018).

Hence, to strengthen its footprint in the Indian Ocean region, India's relations with Maldives are significant considering Maldives strategic location in the contemporary world order. India-Maldives relations, though largely

remain cordial. However, the relations hit a rocky patch when the new President Mohammed Muizzu got elected in September 2023 (Sajjanhar, 2024). The nosedive in the bilateral relations as highlighted by Bharti due to: Chinese increasing inclination towards the Maldives, political instability, a carving for greater autonomy and the newly elected President of Maldives inclination towards China and Turkey, nonetheless his India out campaign (Bharti, 2024).

This paper seeks to examine already existing literature on India-Maldives relations, particularly amid the changing geopolitical locus of the Indian Ocean. The following section gives a brief background of India-Maldives ties and their complementarities. Subsequently, it highlights how the recent tilt of Maldives has implications for India's Maldives ties. Finally, it discusses the challenge of sustaining friendly ties with the Maldives and what policy stances India should adopt to counter the growing China-Maldives bonhomie and accomplish its foreign policy endeavour in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON INDIA MALDIVES TIES

The literature review enables us to understand what shapes India Maldives relations in the past. Moreover, it helps in understanding India's foreign policy with reference to Maldives in present. Different scholars highlight different dimensions of India-Maldives relations and India's policy posture towards the Indian Ocean region generally and Maldives particularly amid the shift of geopolitics locus from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region. In '*India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean: emergence of a new Indo-Maldives strategic dynamic*' Zahir discusses how the growing rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean region led to a substantial transition in the Indo-Maldives strategic relations. He further highlights how Maldives strategic location enables it to adopt Hedging tactics to get benefit from both the regional powers in the region. However, the author didn't discuss at length India's geographical proximity to the Maldives and what advantages India will get due to its huge soft power potential in the Maldives.

Ashish Kumar Basu in his paper entitled '*Some Reflections on Indo -Maldives Relations*' elucidates, how Maldives emerged as an independent state in the post-colonial regime. He further provides what factors contributed to promoting an isolation stance in the foreign policy by the Maldives in the initial years after gaining independence and subsequently the role of India in maintaining peace in Maldives. The author also discussed at length what factors bring synergy between India and Maldives during the Cold War and post-cold period. Though the author provides an explicit trajectory of India-Maldives ties. However, it didn't shed light upon the changing geopolitics and China's increasing inclination in the region and its role in shaping the foreign policy discourse of India and Maldives in the Indian Ocean region.

Ghosh in '*Maritime Security Trilateralism: India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives*' provides that Maldives and Sri Lanka being key players in the Indian Ocean region have a significant role in the security complex in the IOR. He also discusses the trilateral cooperation between India and the two states and its role in maintaining peace and security in the IOR. However, the author failed to highlight the role of domestic factors and the international milieu in shaping the ties between India and the two countries in the Indian Ocean region. Further, this paper focuses only on the security aspects of the countries and doesn't pay heed towards the deep historical and cultural ties of the South Asian countries.

In "*Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*" Robert D Kaplan held that the Indian Ocean region started emerging as a new ground for power politics, following the shift of geopolitics locus from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. He further highlights that the significance of the region also because around 40 per cent of the world's seaborne trade passes through the strait of Hormuz which is located on the western side of the Indian Ocean. However, it is necessary to mention here that the term 'Monsoon' doesn't have any climatic significance rather it is used as a metaphor to show the perplexed situation of the region, the region not only possesses the world's largest natural reserves but also a locus of certain global threats. Kaplan even highlighted that the desire of India to become a great power owing to its strategic location and China's ambition to have control over the Indian Ocean to fulfil its growing energy demands may lead to a potential conflict between the two in the future. Considering the chances of conflict the author provides that the USA should act as a balancer in the region. Kaplan is also optimistic about USA dominance as he holds that the USA will continue to dominate the world due to its huge economic and military potential. Kaplan's '*The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*' is a well-researched treatise for a comprehensive understanding of the Indian Ocean region. However, Kaplan did not stress the role of other small island countries like Maldives, which also has a crucial role in shaping the political scenario in the region due to its geopolitical vitality in contemporary geopolitics.

Amir Ranjan in “*The Maldives Geopolitical dilemma: India China rivalry, entry of USA*” provides that Maldives's relations with China saw a dramatic rise during the regime of President Abdullah Yemeen. He also held that significant investment to the Maldives from China following its official acceptance of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative. However, the arrival Solih led Govt in the Maldives again saw the shift of the pendulum towards India first. Though a significant boost to security and economic linkages has been given between China and Maldives, the arrival of Solih reaffirms its deep inclination and proactive foreign policy posture towards India. The author provides that the already existing turbulence was further accentuated following the USA's entry into the Maldives. Though, the paper gives a comprehensive picture of contemporary power politics and the increasing inclination of world powers towards the littoral states in the Indian Ocean region. However, it failed to discuss at length, what benefits India will get from being a special strategic partner of the USA so far as its relations with Maldives are concerned amid the growing bonhomie China Maldives in the region.

After examining the existing literature, it has been observed that there is scanty of literature wherein the India-Maldives ties trajectory has been discussed in a synchronised manner. Moreover, it is also observed that compulsion which promotes the necessity of sustenance between the relations between the two not discussed at length. This paper seeks to highlight changing contours of India Maldives ties and the necessary steps India can take to swing the pendulum back amid the recent strained relations.

NAVIGATING THE TRAJECTORY OF INDIA MALDIVES RELATIONS

India-Maldives relations commenced when Maldives gained independence in 1965. However, the ties were not elevated to great heights in the late to early 1970s. The factors facilitating the coldness in the ties. Basu highlighted that India lacks a pragmatic outlook in foreign relations with her small neighbouring states. Moreover, the Indifferent attitude of India towards her small neighbours along with developments such as Sikkim's merger with India in 1975, the emergence of Bangladesh with the active help of India, etc., created a fear-psychosis of Indian hegemony in the minds of small neighbouring states. However, during the regime of President Nasir Maldives maintained some sort of isolationism in global politics even contributing to perpetuating the existing coldness (Basu, 2002).

The episode of coldness shows some sort of transformation with the arrival of Mr Gaydom's to the post of President in the year 1978. Unlike, the incumbent president, the newly elected President has shown his inclination towards strengthening ties with the countries in South Asia. However, Rajagopalan highlighted that there were no special strategic relations with any state (Rajagopalan, 2005). The year 1988 is considered to be historic so far as India-Maldives ties is concerned. In 1988 when Gayoom confronted a coup he made a desperate appeal to Delhi for aid. (Smith, 2020). Rajiv Gandhi the then PM of India responded by sending paratroopers on short notice to deal with mercenaries hired by the Maldivian business interest group under the leadership of Abdullah Luthufi, who had attempted to infiltrate the country as tourists and gain control over various key government installations. The Indian paratroopers conducted “Operation Cactus” to clear the Maldivian capital city from mercenaries and their supporters (Ranjan, 2021).

Consequently, the relations between the two countries started witnessing the thrust and it became evident that with its prompt military assistance in 1988, beginning a new Indo-Maldives strategic relationship in which India became the de facto port-of-first call for the Maldives (Zahir, 2021). With the arrival of the 21st century, the contours of India-Maldives ties getting sophisticated, this can be attributed to numerous factors, establishing democratic credentials in Maldives in 2008 where Gayoom was bested by 41-year-old opposition candidate Mohammed Nasheed (Smith, 2020). Changing geopolitics from the Atlantic towards the Indo Indo-Pacific, Kaplan while highlighting the significance of the Indian Ocean region in the contemporary world order stressed that the Indian Ocean Region is a significant geostrategic node for economic, environmental and human resources (Kaplan, 2011). The Indian Ocean emerged as one of the most dynamic geopolitical flashpoints in the last two decades (Attanayake & Atmakuri, 2021)). Notwithstanding this, Chinese interest in the region in general and Maldives, in particular, has proven to be a significant factor in the India-Maldives ties. The arrival of Nasheed to the political front expresses its desire to maintain strong strategic ties with India. During a visit to Delhi in 2009, Nasheed agreed to have India deploy 26 coastal radars to monitor the Maldives' territorial waters and have the Indian Coast Guard and Navy help patrol the Maldives' territorial waters (Smith, 2020). But one can delineate the transformation from the earlier diplomatic tactics as now Nasheed Govt also wants to build its relationship with China as well. Subsequently, on 26 May 2009, the Maldives opened its embassy in Beijing, while the Chinese embassy in the capital of the Maldives, Malé, was opened in 2011 (Ranjan, 2021) Though the ties between China

and Maldives started getting strengthen the Maldives promoted an India first policy in regional security framework.

Rasheed argued that despite India's first policy in regional politics, the Maldives partnership with China has expanded, particularly with the arrival of Yemen's regime. Though, the Yemen regime is considered to be a pro-China regime a deeper analysis of its foreign policy reflects the ethos of realpolitik and what scholars in international politics argued as Hedging tactics. It was during Yameen's tenure that the Maldives signed a comprehensive Action Plan for Defence with India in 2016, and India handed over a second Advanced Lightweight Helicopter to the Maldivian military and sent an Indian military and technical staff contingent to operate it. They have been stationed in the central Laamu atoll. It is within this context of concerns over Indian military presence, along with other projects such as the major training facility for the police in Addu Atoll, that some in the Maldives began to suspect that India was effectively aiming for a permanent Indian military presence, if not a base, in the Maldives (Zahir, 2021). During his visit to China to attend the opening ceremony of the second Summer Youth Olympics in August 2014, Yameen confirmed his interest in expanding the BRI in the Maldives (Rasheed, 2023). A month later he hosted President Xi Jinping in Male, calling China one of the Maldives' "closest friends, most trusted allies, and the most dependable development partners." Most importantly for Beijing, Xi secured a pledge from Yameen to join and support and join China's BRI (Smith, 2020). Later, Yameen attempted to curtail Indo-Maldives strategic relations, amid worsening Indo-Maldives relations as his government intensified economic relations with China, Indian refusal to take back its two helicopters and their crews despite Male's refusal to extend the necessary documents is arguably an indication of this constrained strategic autonomy, (Zahir, 2020).

A decisive shift became visible, following the 2018 election, Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohammed Solih sought to revitalise his country's India First policy. This heralded an end to the former government's pro-China Stance (Rasheed, 2023). After taking office, Solih's first overseas visit was to India, from 16 to 18 December 2018. He was accompanied by a high-level delegation comprised of the ministers for finance, infrastructure, economic development and foreign affairs. During the visit, Narendra Modi announced a US\$1.4 billion loan to the Maldives to pay its debt to China (Ranjan, 2021). Notwithstanding this, in June 2019, Prime Minister Modi made the Maldives his first foreign destination after winning a second term. In Male he signed agreements advancing plans for a coastal surveillance radar system and a military training centre for the Maldivian military (Smith, 2020).

The new government also quickly renewed the necessary documentation to keep the two Indian helicopters and military personnel, resumed the annual Indo-Maldives Defence Cooperation Dialogue, which first started in 2017, and resumed the installation of the Radar Surveillance System (Zahir, 2021). It is also argued that India believes that it has moral obligations to assist the Maldives in resolving debt crises by presenting fresh investment opportunities, notably in the tourism sector given the two countries' proximity (Thakur, 2023). The provision of extensive and rapid Indian military assistance and investment capital after Solih came to power has further cemented the Indo-Maldives strategic relationship (Zahir, 2021). India's MEA S. Jaishankar also expressed via his tweet that our neighbourhood first and India's first policy also complimentary they took our special partnership forward (Jaishankar, 2022).

The political transitions in Maldives are poised to exert significant influence in the bilateral relation between India and Maldives in particular and the geopolitical dynamics of the region generally. The victory of Mohamed Muizzu a pro-China candidate in the recent presidential election in Maldives has ignite concerns for India's interest in the region and Maldives as well. Muizzu after coming to power started criticising India's first policy of Solih and simultaneously started India out campaign which meant removing Indian troops from the island. Through rallies, disinformation, protests and the campaign have politicised India's defence and development assistance, mustered nationalist sentiments, and accused India and the MDP government of violating the country's sovereignty (Pant, 2023). Though the arrival of Muizzu has marked certain downturns in India's ties with Maldives. However, certain complementarities between the two can't allow them to diverge for a longer period and even to a larger extent.

COMPLEMENTARITIES IN INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS

The sustenance to the long friendly and cordial ties between India and Maldives owes its origin to a large number of complementarities. India's intervention in the Maldives in 1988 is testimony to the fact of India's role in its maritime neighbourhood and is even cited by many as a model for the benign security leadership role that India can play in the Indian Ocean. Since the events of 1988, the bilateral security relationship between India and the

Maldives has seen the upward trend. This can be substantiated as India provides equipment and training to the Maldivian armed forces and the Indian Navy plays a key role in the Maldives' maritime security. In many respects, India acts as a key security provider to the Maldives and in the coming years, it seems likely that India will be required to provide even greater assistance in the stabilisation of the country (Brewster, 2018).

Moreover, Shivamurthy highlighted that India's assistance to the Maldives has embraced a multifaceted approach in recent time such as assisting with defence infrastructure and radars which includes Composite Training facility of the Maldives National defence force, which was inaugurated in the June 2019, Ekatha Harbour, India's biggest grant in aid project in Maldives, the foundation stone for which was laid in 2023. In addition to this, India has been involved in construction of Maldives new Ministry of Defence headquarters. Moreover, India also assisted Maldives by supplying military hardware and equipment's like landing craft assault ship and fast patrol vessel in 2023. Another significant area of assistance involves organising institutionalised high-level engagements and joint exercises which includes Dosti, Ekuverin, and Trilateral exercise between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives. In addition, the militaries of both the countries also engages through the platforms like Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, Indian Ocean Rim-Association and Goa maritime conclave (Shivamurthy, 2023).

Another striking factor which complements the ties between India and Maldives is the huge developmental assistance to the Maldives, it is further added that India's developmental assistance to Maldives increased in the current financial year despite strained ties between the two countries. India's developmental assistance to the Maldives has embraced a multifaceted approach: one of the key projects is a \$500 million initiative aimed at improving road and bridges around the Male, the capital of Maldives. Besides, India is supporting the construction of two airports with cost of around \$1 30 million (Times of India, 2024). However, it has also been stated that historically, India has perpetually supported Maldives in various fronts, from national development to security and economy. India's assistance to Maldives ranges from daily necessities to education, security and healthcare, including the supply of COVID-19 vaccines. Being a prominent player in the region, India always extended support to Maldives in its developmental strides by assisting, prioritising the Maldives as part of its Neighbourhood first policy. This explicitly the use of soft power in strengthening its ties with littoral states especially Maldives in the Indian Ocean region (Mahalanobis, 2024). The changing world order to the Indo-Pacific wherein both India and Maldives are important players consider it significant to collaborate to promote sustainable development and declare the Indian Ocean region as a zone of peace. To promote such a vision, both countries engaged at various forums. Most importantly Project SAGAR wherein both countries converge for promoting a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean region (Padmaja, 2015). In addition, India and Maldives collaborate with other littoral states bilateral and multilateral to promote sustainable development considering the threat of Climate change and sea level rise as highlighted by the IPCC AR6 report. To combat the increasing threats and increasing maritime domain awareness recently the 16th edition of India Maldives Sri Lanka trilateral exercise Dosti has been conducted in Feb 2024 which aim at promoting regional synergy to enhance maritime security and Interoperability (Indian express, 2024).

Bilateral Trade Figures (Jan-Dec, in US\$ million)

Year	Total export to Maldives	Total Import from Maldives	Total Trade
2014	170.60	2.90	173.50
2015	225.82	3.00	228.82
2016	274.55	1.55	276.10
2017	282.04	4.12	286.16
2018	286.13	3.01	288.14
2019	290.27	3.42	293.69
2020	241.90	3.33	245.23
2021	317.35	5.94	323.29
2022	495.40	6.42	501.82
2023	543.83	5.14	548.97

(Source: Maldives Customs Service)

CHALLENGES TO INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE IN MALDIVES

The arrival of Muizzu to the Presidential post in the Maldives earmarked a rocky patch so far as the bilateral relationship with India is concerned. It is further stated that, the bilateral relations under Muizzu would not be as

warm and cordial as under the previous President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih (Sajjanhar, 2024). The certain challenges which impinge India's relations with Maldives: Islamic radicalisation, it has been found that over the past decade, the number of Maldivians inclination to ISIS and Pakistan-based madrasas and jihadist groups have increased rapidly. Protests by Islamists bearing ISIS flags are frequent on the island. However, it is the same forces that are involved in anti-India activities in the archipelago (Manoharan, 2022). Moreover, what raises serious implications for India's stance in the Maldives is the India out campaign which become prominent with the emergence of Muizzu to scene in the Maldives politics. Under India out campaign, the President immediately called for the removal of Indian troops from the Island, which was deployed there under a defence cooperation agreement with Maldives wherein Indian soldiers will train Maldivian counterparts in combat, reconnaissance and participation in rescue operations (Business standard, 2024).

In addition to this in contrast to the preceding President, after the victory, Muizzu also broke the tradition by visiting India first; instead of doing this, he visited Turkey. His priority is to reduce dependence on India, which also signalled a shift in foreign policy. Meanwhile, he also secured UAE aid for an India funded project at Male airport (Bharti, 2024).

Muizzu government also declined to attend a regular session of the Colombo Security conclave 2023. However, it sent new Vice President Hussain Latheef to the second Indian Ocean region Forum, convened by China in December 2023. The simmering tension intensified when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Lakshadweep to inaugurate the Kochi Lakshadweep Island submarine optical fibre connection and some other projects but while doing so, he also took out for some snorkelling and leisure activities that took social media by storm (Pant, 2024). The visuals tweeted by Modi on the social media platform "X" drew much vituperation from three deputy ministers of the Muizzu government. Although Modi did not mention the Maldives, the Maldivian ministers presumed it was about promoting the Lakshadweep as an alternative to the Maldives. They trashed the quality of Indian beaches and made insulting remarks about the prime minister. This eventually led to the suspension of three deputy ministers by Muizzu, but hyper nationalists of India launched a campaign to boycott Maldives and celebrate the virtues of Lakshadweep as a superior tourist destination. The campaign worsened matters for the Indian government's engagement with the Maldives (Raja Mohan, 2024).

However, the new president didn't renew an agreement with the Indian Navy for hydrographic surveys of the Maldives exclusive economic zone (Raja Mohan, 2024). The cancellation of the agreement explicitly reflects the anti-India instance of the Muizzu government. This even becomes more evident with Muizzu's five-day visit to China. During the visit, China and Maldives signed 20 agreements covering many areas including strengthening tourism, disaster risk reduction, blue economy and investment in the digital economy. The agreement was also signed to accelerate the pace of the project signed under BRI (Rajagopalan, 2024). Besides, an action plan for the China Maldives comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership was to further strengthen their commitments to collaboration in BRI. Following his return from China, Muizzu stated that the nation is not in the backyard of any country and sets May 10 deadline for Indian troops to leave Maldives territory (Kumar, 2024).

STRATEGIES INDIA CAN OPT TO SWING THE PENDULUM BACK

It can't be denied that global politics is a dynamic affair and as such the ties between countries at the global level are also shaped by their dynamic national interest. The replica of this can be visible with the arrival of Muizzu at the presidential Post in Maldives. Muizzu Pro China policy has implications for India-Maldives ties and the geopolitics in the region as well. Revi (2023) argued that India is a prominent player in the region and its outreach has not simply been with the government in power but aimed at benefitting the people of Maldives. Its Impact on High Impact Community Projects has been well received (Revi, 2023).

Moreover, India should strengthen its position in the region and the people of littoral states in general and Maldives in particular by catalysing initiatives like SAGAR, i.e. security and growth for all in the region. Under this India stressed that it would do everything to safeguard its sovereignty and to defend its interests. Equally, India will also work to ensure a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean and to use its capabilities for the benefit of all in the region. Moreover, India will deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and island states and assist in building their maritime security capabilities (Padmaja, 2015). Basu also argued that the lack of pragmatism in its foreign policy posture with its neighbours also makes it easy for China to bonhomie with states in the region (Basu, 2002). To counter growing Chinese interest in the region India should perpetuate the spirit of neighbourhood first policy and adopt a proactive posture in its ties with its neighbours, especially with Maldives. The striking feature of the Neighbourhood First policy is that India must resolve its differences with its

small neighbours, project a better image and foster enhanced connectivity (Kaura & Rani, 2020)). To revive the historical and cultural linkages which also have its role in smoothening the ties India should utilise Project Mausam wherein emphasis is given to reviving lost linkages with nations along the Indian Ocean to strengthen bilateral cooperation and partnership (Ranjan, 2017). C. Raja Mohan also stressed that two sides must recognise the Imperatives of geography and territorial sovereignty. The Maldives must realise that pushing a large neighbour beyond a point will have a negative consequence (Raja Mohan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The landscape of the international milieu and foreign policy discourse is decidedly changing. Smaller nations are being presented with several new alternatives and opportunities for engagement that are no longer dominated by historical ties and geographical proximity. As a result, U-turns and tilts in foreign policy are going to become the norm rather than the exception. Moreover, South Asia's small states like the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius are also 'trying to steer clear of making definite choices' between China and India and are engaging in hedging behaviour to maximize their policy autonomy (Lim & Mukherjee, 2019). The new government of President Muizzu in Maldives is in the process of doing precisely this. As they explore potential alternatives to reduce the nation's reliance on India, such as a deal to procure drones from Türkiye, and health insurance to cover hospitals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Thailand (Revi, 2024). Furthermore, it also strives to get benefit from both the benign powers i.e. China and India in South Asia. However, the tilt of the pendulum towards China in the recent times has become cause of concern for India. Given the growing dependence of the Maldives on China, India needs to be cautious and rethink its foreign policy focusing on its economic and political relations with the Maldives given the significance of the region for India (Upadhyay & Mehrotra, 2023).

Maldives being a prominent player due to its strategic can't be ignored as the country is near its west coast and protects critical Sea Lanes of Communications which includes the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca, which are critical for the global marine trade and India's economic interests, transporting a large portion of India's external commerce and energy imports (Singh, 2023).

Considering the geopolitical Vitality of Maldives despite having an important actor in the Indian Ocean region. Indian foreign policy makers require to go for a calibrated response in order to perpetuate a peaceful and friendly relations with Maldives. India can use platform such as SAGAR, Neighbourhood first policy, SAARC Project Mausam, to remove the turbulence between the ties for achieving its pursuit of a free and peaceful India ocean. However, it is argued that Maldives can't ignore India altogether and it can be explicit that despite Muazu's initial India-out campaign, he has also expressed a desire to maintain a balanced relationship between India and China (Mitra, 2023). Moreover, the India-Maldives-Sri Lanka trilateral 'Dosti 16' Coast Guard Exercises that took place in April 2024 with Maldives hosting is a further sign that the new government is keen to put differences aside and to move bilateral relations forward. In addition to Dosti-16, Maldives also joined India's biennial Milan Naval Exercises that took place in Visakhapatnam from 19-27 February 2024 (Revi, 2024). All this indicates that the downturn will not escalate further considering the deep historical, geographical and cultural linkages between the two countries. However, India in order to perpetuate the same requires timely completion of its developmental project in Maldives and kept a watch on the bilateral ties between Maldives and Beijing considering the huge significance of Maldives in the current geopolitical and geo-economic world order.

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