

Navigating Turbulent Waters: Analysis of the Current Diplomatic Rift Between India and Maldives

Bhasker Rawat

Postgraduate - Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, India
E-mail: bhaskerawat954@gmail.com

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Abstract

The geographical positioning of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean renders it a strategic advantage, serving as a pivotal point along major trade routes between East and West. India and Maldives commenced economic cooperation following the success of Operation Cactus in 1988. Prime Minister Modi's tenure has underscored India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy,' emphasizing strengthened ties with neighbouring nations. However, recent tensions between India and Maldives have questioned this policy, exposing complex dynamics. President Mohamed Muizzu's adoption of an 'India Out' slogan, driven by personal motives, diverges from the cooperative stance of former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. Also, the derogatory remarks by three Maldivian ministers over Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Lakshadweep islands sparked a social media backlash and escalated tensions. India recognizes Lakshadweep's economic and strategic significance, particularly in tourism and countering Chinese influence. Resolving the rift demands diplomatic engagement that respects Maldives' sovereignty while normalizing relations. A sophisticated approach is necessary, given the Maldives' geopolitical importance, rather than impulsive reactions. This paper will delve into the historical evolution of Indo-Maldives relations, analyzing current developments and the influence of China and Turkey in the Maldives, posing threats to India. It will explore the origins, nature, and implications of the 'India Out' slogan, offering insights into the challenges confronting India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' vis-à-vis its relationship with the Maldives.

Keywords: *India and Maldives, Neighbourhood First Policy, India Out, Lakshadweep, Operation Cactus, geopolitical*

Introduction

The historical ties between India and Maldives have been characterized by warmth and deep cultural, linguistic, and commercial connections. Positioned strategically in the Indian Ocean, Maldives holds significant importance in India's regional strategy. Since gaining independence from British rule in 1965, the two nations have fostered a friendly relationship which was strengthened during M.A. Gayoom's presidency from 1978 to 2008 and continued during Mohamed Nasheed's tenure from 2008 to 2012. India has

consistently supported Maldives' socio-economic development, modernization, and defence, with engagements intensifying in the late 1980s through initiatives like 'Operation Cactus' to thwart a coup against Gayoom's regime. (Kumar, 2017) Despite political changes, including the transition to democratic government in 2008, the relationship between two remained positive. However, tensions arose with Abdulla Yameen's presidency from 2013 onwards, marked by allegations of Indian interference in Maldives' internal affairs and Yameen's increasing alignment with China. This shift strained India-Maldives relations,

transitioning the once amicable ties to a more contentious phase. In 2018, President Ibrahim Solih's election led to an 'India First' policy, emphasizing economic and defense ties with India and addressing concerns over Chinese involvement. (Shivamurthy, 2022) Mohamed Muizzu's presidency marked a departure from previous Maldivian approaches, exemplified by the 'India Out' campaign and accusations of Indian interference, straining bilateral relations. Despite India's attempts to maintain non-intrusive defense cooperation, Muizzu's campaign gained traction, especially among Maldivian youth, indicating a surge in anti-India sentiments. The diplomatic row over Prime Minister Modi's visit to Lakshadweep Island escalated tensions, sparking social media backlash and the #BoycottMaldives movement, leading to a significant drop in Indian tourist arrivals, underscoring the economic impact of diplomatic strains. However, the active participation of Indian citizens in promoting Lakshadweep tourism demonstrates grassroots diplomacy's positive role in bilateral dynamics. Muizzu's preference for a state visit to China over India further strained ties, suggesting a potential shift in the Maldives' foreign policy orientation. Amid these geopolitical complexities, constructive engagement between India and the Maldives is crucial for mutual benefit and regional stability. However, concerns persist over Muizzu's potential pro-Chinese foreign policy which could strain relations with India. (Sultana, 2023) By examining these dynamics, this case study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities facing India-Maldives relations in navigating a changing geopolitical landscape.

Review of Literature

India and the Maldives share a longstanding history and cultural bond, shaping their political interactions with mutual understanding and cooperation, underpinned by their geographical proximity and shared heritage. Given the significance of their ties, the literature explores valuable insights into the complexities and dynamics of the Indo-Maldives relationship. In "The Sweet-and-Sour India-Maldives Relationship," Sumant Kumar offers significant insights into the historical and current status of India-Maldives ties, focusing on cooperation, tension, and India's imperative to protect its strategic interests amid increasing external pressures. (Kumar, 2017) Further, N Sathiya Moorthy underscores India's pivotal role in assisting the Maldives' transition to democracy and highlights India's sustained engagement in key areas such as education, economy, and security. (Moorthy, 2010) Harish K. Thakur's paper, "Contesting China in the Maldives: India's Foreign Policy Challenge," presents a comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics in India-Maldives relations amidst growing Chinese influence. Thakur delves into India's foreign policy challenges, emphasizing the Maldives' strategic significance and the impact of China's growing presence while highlighting India's proactive efforts to protect its interests through strategic partnerships. (Thakur, 2023) David Brewster's article, "Maldives: India first or India out?" examines the recent protests against Indian military presence and highlights the complexities of maintaining the "India First" policy amidst regional rivalries. (Brewster, 2021) Additionally, he provides an analysis of India-Maldives relations and explores the nuanced balance between sovereignty and strategic partnerships, offering valuable insights into maritime security and regional dynamics in the Indian Ocean.

Gulbin Sultana, however, explores the effects of Mohamed Muizzu's victory in the recent Maldivian Presidential election on the relationship between India and Maldives, examining both his foreign policy positions and the electoral dynamics that contributed to his success. Sultana's analysis offers a balanced view of the challenges and opportunities in recalibrating India-Maldives relations under Muizzu's leadership. (Sultana, 2023) A more comprehensive analysis of the 'India Out' campaign was explored by Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy who analyzes the 'India Out' campaign in the Maldives, revealing its origins, nature, and implications, which could significantly impact bilateral relations and regional stability. (Shivamurthy, 2022) Shivamurthy's analysis provides insights into the complexities involved in the campaign, and the role of China and offers valuable perspectives for researchers seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of India-Maldives relations. Ashok Sajjanhar provides an overview of the deteriorating relations between India and Maldives under President Mohamed Muizzu's leadership. Sajjanhar's emphasis on the challenges posed by Muizzu's efforts to diminish India's influence highlights the need for India to reassess its approach to neighbouring countries and prioritize diplomatic efforts to safeguard its regional interests. (Sajjanhar, 2024) The literature review highlights the nuanced understanding of the complexities and dynamics shaping India-Maldives relations underscoring the importance of proactive diplomacy and engagement to ensure stability and prosperity in the region. However, there is a need to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of India-Maldives relations to better understand their influence on bilateral cooperation and efforts to normalize relations.

From Past to Present: The Evolution of Indo-Maldives Relations

The relationship between India and Maldives is deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and geographical ties, with the Maldivian population tracing its origins back to early settlers from India. Since Maldives' transition from Buddhism to Sunni Islam in the 12th century, these ties have evolved, shaped significantly by political leadership and bilateral understanding. (Moorthy, 2010) India recognized Maldives in 1965, establishing diplomatic ties and opening a mission in 1972, later upgrading to a resident High Commissioner in 1980. Conversely, Maldives inaugurated its High Commission in New Delhi in 2004. Despite occasional fluctuations, such as Maldives' decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement in 1976, both countries have maintained bilateral cooperation within regional frameworks like SAARC and SAFTA. India's proactive role in addressing crises in Maldives underscores the depth of bilateral relations. In 1988, India swiftly responded to Maldives' plea for help during an attempted coup by the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam with 'Operation Cactus'. Additionally, during the 2004 tsunami, Indian aid was quick to arrive, and in 2014, India provided crucial assistance during the Maldives' water crisis. (Kumar, 2017) In return, Maldives has consistently stood in solidarity with India on various international platforms, including the UN, Commonwealth, NAM, and SAARC. Bilateral exercises like 'DOSTI' between the Indian Coast Guard and Maldives National Security Service further enhanced cooperation, particularly in maritime security sector. India's assistance in maritime patrol and surveillance, along with joint efforts in combating piracy and terrorism, demonstrates the strategic importance of Maldives in India's maritime security calculus. Despite challenges, both nations continue to collaborate in areas of mutual interest, including trade, defense, and regional stability.

After the Maldives transitioned to a multi-party democracy in 2008, its relationship with India remained robust, driven by shared democratic ideals. Mohammed Nasheed's presidency further strengthened bilateral ties, exemplified by the 2009 security pact permitting Indian military presence and joint operations. (Kumar, 2017) However, Nasheed's ousting from power in 2012 strained relations, particularly when he sought refuge in India, leading to tensions over perceived interference in the internal affairs of Maldives. Abdulla Yameen's presidency from 2013 exacerbated strains as he tilted towards China, evident in cancelling Indian projects and increasing Chinese investments, including the controversial leasing of islands under the BRI project. However, President Solih's 'India First' campaign in 2018 marked a significant shift, aiming to revive ties and reaffirm India's strategic importance. (Deb, 2024) Initiatives spanned security, capacity building for MNDF and joint exercises, and infrastructure development, including healthcare facilities, cultural site restoration, and water projects, signifying a commitment to cooperation and development. Prime Minister Modi's 2019 visit further solidified commitment to bilateral collaboration, stressing regional stability. (Sajjanhar, 2024) However, President Muizzu's 2023 election witnessed a rise in anti-Indian sentiment via the 'India Out' campaign, allegedly fuelled by political disinformation and Chinese support. The European Election Observation Mission's findings highlighted disinformation's role in shaping Maldives' politics and foreign policy, posing challenges to regional stability and India-Maldives relations. (Deb, 2024)

The Political Landscape Behind the 'India Out' Narrative

A diplomatic dispute between India and Maldives erupted on January 4th following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's social media posts praising Lakshadweep's pristine beaches, which incited derogatory and racist remarks from three Maldivian ministers aimed at Indians, and PM Modi himself. These offensive comments, including labelling Modi as a 'puppet of Israel' and a 'clown', sparked outrage among Indian social media users who advocated for boycotting Maldives and promoting tourism in Lakshadweep, amplifying tensions with the trending hashtag #BoycottMaldives. This incident underscored underlying friction since President Mohamed Muizzu's election and his 'India Out' campaign, signalling a deeper rift between the two nations. (Samaranayake, 2024) The genesis of the 'India Out' campaign can be traced back to late 2018, gaining momentum when the opposition coalition, comprising the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC), officially launched the campaign in October 2020. This movement seeks to exploit anti-India sentiments prevalent during the democratic transition, fuelling skepticism towards Indian investments, defense partnerships, and security provisions in the Maldives, with former President Yameen leading the charge. The Progressive Alliance (PA) accused the Solih administration of compromising Maldives' sovereignty by bolstering defense ties with India. China looking for opportunities to reduce Indian influence in the Maldives covertly supported the "India Out" movement. (Sultana, 2023)

In 2009, India supplied the Maldives with a helicopter and agreed to a defense cooperation pact for joint surveillance in the Indian Ocean, drawing opposition criticism over sovereignty. The subsequent year, GMR's airport upgrade project caused legal disputes, spurring anti-India sentiment

and corruption allegations against President Nasheed, resulting in his resignation in 2012. (Shivamurthy, 2022) President Yameen adopted a pro-China stance upon assuming office, fuelling nationalist sentiments through anti-India rhetoric. His government requested India to withdraw helicopters and operatives in 2018, citing espionage allegations. However, President Solih, who took office in 2018, aimed to revive India-Maldives relations and emphasized an 'India First' policy. Nevertheless, the development projects became focal points of the 'India Out' campaign, citing confidential agreements like the Hydrographic Survey, Dornier aircraft, and Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) agreement between India and Maldives. Opposition leaders initiated the "Indian Soldiers Leave" campaign, opposing Solih's decision to reverse Yameen's policy. (Shivamurthy, 2022). Allegations of heightened Indian military presence sparked protests from August 2020 onwards. The opposition formally initiated the 'India Out' protest on Maldivian National Day in October 2020, citing concerns over Indian interference, military expansion and aiding Yameen's arrest. (Shivamurthy, 2022) Despite the ban on the movement in April 2022, the campaign garnered nationalist sentiments by politicizing Indian investments and won the 2023 Presidential election. (Sultana, 2023) The 'India Out' campaign blurred the lines between domestic and international politics in the Maldives, highlighting the significant impact of external influences on the country's internal affairs. (Deb, 2024)

Role of Social Media and Chinese Involvement

Local news outlets affiliated with the Maldivian opposition, such as Dhiyares, The Maldives Journal, and the Maldives News Network (MNN), owned by associates of former President Yameen, played a significant role in promoting the 'India Out' campaign. (Shivamurthy, 2022) These outlets have been instrumental in spreading criticisms of

India and the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), emphasizing speculations regarding confidential agreements, investments, security arrangements, and economic deals. They disseminated disinformation and distorted facts about historical events such as India's integration of Sikkim, Operation Cactus in 1989, and the 2018 Indian helicopter withdrawal from Maldives. (Shivamurthy, 2022) Additionally, they have propagated accusations linking Indians to increasing crime rates in Maldives, including leaking personal details of Indian military personnel and accusing Indian diplomats of corruption and espionage. China's pivotal role in driving the 'India Out' campaign, as noted by the Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives and some Maldivian Democratic Party members. (Shivamurthy, 2021) China's involvement in spreading misinformation extends to other South Asian nations like Nepal and Sri Lanka, where it funded protests resulting in the cancellation of agreements involving India, Japan, and Sri Lanka. The Maldives News Network (MNN), allegedly linked to the Communist Party of China (CPC), regularly disseminates Chinese propaganda from outlets such as Xinhua, Global Times, and CGTN, indicating a close association with Chinese-affiliated media and suspicions of covert funding. (Shivamurthy, 2022) The campaign was covertly supported by China, focused on predetermined strategies to challenge Indian influence in the Maldives.

China-Turkey Dynamics in Indo-Maldives Relations

After Yameen's election in 2013, Maldives intensified engagements with China, notably welcoming President Xi Jinping in 2014 to garner support for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite maintaining an 'India First' policy officially, Yameen forged closer ties with China, leasing islands and signing a Free Trade Agreement. President Muizzu's unconventional

choice of Turkey over India for his first foreign visit signals a shift in Maldives' international relations. Turkey's expanding role in South Asia and aspirations to lead the Muslim world raise concerns for India, hinting at potential Turkish influence in Maldives and its impact on regional dynamics. (Sajjanhar, 2024) Muizzu's deals with Turkey, including a \$37 million drone agreement and plans for food and pharmaceutical imports, aim to reduce reliance on Indian security and enhance ties with China-friendly policies. (Deb, 2024) Muizzu's visit to China further solidified relations, upgrading to 'strategic cooperation' and joining China's Global Development Initiative, Global Strategic Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative, reviving the BRI and Free Trade Agreement.

Upon his return from China, Muizzu criticized the previous Ibrahim Mohamed Solih-led government, alleging undue influence from a particular country. He emphasized Maldives' independence and sovereignty, stating, "We aren't in anyone's backyard. We are an independent and sovereign state. We may be small, but that doesn't give you the license to bully us". (Pattanaik, 2024) Maldives' decision to permit the Chinese vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 to dock in Malé, despite Indian objections, has been closely observed by New Delhi. Muizzu's initiatives, such as extending public health insurance to hospitals in Dubai and Thailand instead of India and Sri Lanka, aim to diminish dependency on India. (Sajjanhar, 2024) This, along with the non-renewal of the hydrographic agreement with India and the demand for the withdrawal of Indian humanitarian assistance troops, signals a proactive shift towards China and other nations to fulfill Maldives' strategic and daily requirements. Muizzu administration is making efforts to replace India with China as the primary partner, including attracting Chinese tourists to offset Indian tourism dominance and establishing new ties with Turkey for trade and staple imports. In response to the India-Maldives discord, India's

External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, acknowledged the nature of politics and stated, "Politics is politics. I cannot guarantee that in every country, every day, everybody will support or agree with us". (Pattanaik, 2024)

Implications of Diplomatic Row on India-Maldives Relations

The Progressive Alliance indicated intent to review defense agreements between India and Maldives, citing sovereignty concerns. However, President Muizzu emphasized the agreements' lack of public disclosure as the main issue. These agreements, including India's hydrographic survey and Coastguard Harbour deal, provide crucial benefits like infrastructure and surveillance support. India's military presence aids in medical evacuations and pilot training, but Muizzu's opposition may lead to their withdrawal, affecting Maldives' capabilities. (Sultana, 2023) Worsening relations with India hold significant consequences due to its substantial financial support, healthcare assistance, and crucial role in Maldives' imports and services sector. Indian grants make up 1.5% of Maldives' budget, with India as its third-largest trading partner. (Pattanaik, 2024) The withdrawal of Indian troops and suspension of the hydrographic survey will worsen the situation, impacting critical services and strategic cooperation.

Muizzu's potential distancing from India risks a significant loss of tourism revenue, as Indian visitors contributed over 14% to Maldives' tourism in 2022. With tourism accounting for 28% of Maldives' GDP, such a move could have adverse economic effects, as Maldives is one of top tourist destination for Indians. (Samaranayake, 2024) While Maldives seeks to attract more Chinese tourists, this may deepen economic reliance on China, potentially leading to a debt trap. Additionally, Turkish drones cannot fulfil and match the crucial functions undertaken by Indian troops in ensuring Maldives' security. However,

China's increasing involvement adds pressure to India's interests in the Indian Ocean. Islamic radicalism in Maldives poses a security threat to India and other neighbouring countries. Under Yameen's presidency, Maldives witnessed a surge in Islamic radicalism, fostering concerns for regional security. Attacks, like the 2022 attacks during an Indian event on International Yoga Day, underscored rising intolerance and fundamentalism in Maldives. (Deb, 2024)

A Closer Look at India's Neighbourhood First Policy

India's smaller neighbours often grapple with what is termed as "small-country syndrome," characterized by apprehensions regarding their independence and sovereignty vis-à-vis India's dominant regional position. Within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India stands as the sole member sharing borders with all others, holding significant sway with over 70% of the total area, population, and GDP of SAARC states. Despite India's assurances of prioritizing their security and prosperity, smaller neighbours harbour concerns about potential encroachments on their autonomy. India is proactively pursuing the Neighbourhood First Policy to engage with its land and maritime neighbours. (Mazumdar, 2015) Prime Minister Modi's frequent visits to neighbouring countries, notably Nepal and Sri Lanka, signify India's commitment to strengthening bilateral ties. (Sajjanhar, 2024) Despite India's endeavours, its dominance in South Asia finds acceptance only in Bhutan, with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal demonstrating differing levels of reluctance towards Indian influence, frequently diverging from its preferences and requests. (Sridharan, 2017)

In the case of Maldives, India's longstanding support for Maldives during critical junctures, including the 1988 coup attempt, the 2004

Tsunami, the 2014 water crisis, and the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, underscores its role as the 'first responder' in times of distress. However, certain segments within neighbouring countries exploit the 'anti-India small country syndrome' for domestic political gains, as witnessed in Muizzu's recent electoral campaign. While neighbouring countries leverage the "China card" for economic benefits, they also strive to maintain warm relations with both India and China. Muizzu's predecessor, Solih, pursued a balanced approach, but Muizzu's government appears to lean heavily towards China, evident in the downgrading of ties with India. (Sajjanhar, 2024) India's adept diplomatic strategy effectively manages challenges posed by Muizzu's administration, ensuring a positive relationship with the Maldives under the "Neighbourhood First" policy. (Samaranayake, 2024) While India values diversification in foreign policy, the Maldives' desire for greater independence should be understood.

India's "Neighbourhood First" policy faces criticism for its perceived tendency to interfere in the domestic affairs of smaller neighbouring countries, either under the guise of security concerns or to counter unfriendly strategic choices. Maldives, in particular, resents Indian interference in its political developments, viewing it as a violation of sovereignty. Even before the current controversy, India expressed strong disapproval of the arrest of former pro-India Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed on terrorism charges. In response, Maldives urged India to "adhere to the principle of Panchsheel and not intervene in domestic politics of Maldives". (Jacob, 2016) The region's countries resent India's influence on internal matters, prompting a re-evaluation of the efficacy of the Neighbourhood First policy. India must recognize that muscular tactics cannot substitute mature diplomacy, as evidenced by past experiences in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. (Jacob, 2016) While India wields significant regional influence, it cannot unilaterally dictate

policy changes in neighbouring states. (Sridharan, 2017). The Maldives situation prompts India to adapt and refine the Neighbourhood First policy for strategic alignment.

Recommendations

Following are the recommendations which can help India to navigate the complexities of its relationship with the Maldives effectively, fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and stability.

1. Enhanced Public Diplomacy: India should enhance its public diplomacy by intensifying engagement with Maldivian segments favouring strong bilateral relations. Prioritizing diplomatic channels can lay the groundwork for direct connections, nurturing a sense of trust among the Maldivian population.

2. Developmental Aid: India should continue its developmental aid to underscore its commitment to the Maldives' prosperity. By targeting infrastructure, healthcare, education, sustainable growth, India can strengthen ties, fostering positive perceptions among Maldivians.

3. Addressing Negative Perceptions: India and Maldives should collaborate to reduce negative perceptions and misunderstandings on both ends by initiating open dialogue. Mutual trust and understanding should be fostered through constructive engagement, highlighting the benefits of cooperation and partnership.

4. Exploring New Areas of Cooperation: India should explore new avenues for cooperation with the Maldives beyond traditional areas of engagement. Expanding collaboration in renewable energy, climate adaptation, technology transfer, and cultural exchange will strengthen the diplomatic ties.

5. Track-II Diplomacy: Engaging in Track-II diplomacy can supplement official channels of communication and build trust between the two countries. Track-II dialogues involving academics, think tanks and civil society organizations can provide valuable recommendations for enhancing bilateral relations.

6. People-to-People Exchanges and Role of Social Media: Encouraging interaction among individuals from India and the Maldives through student exchange programs and cultural events can enhance mutual understanding. Social media influencers can play a vital role by advocating for cultural exchange, promoting tourism, and bridging gaps, thereby contributing to improving relations between the two countries.

7. Nuanced Approach: India should employ a nuanced approach in its dealings with the Maldives, balancing assertiveness with sensitivity to Maldivian interests. However, concern regarding India's strategic and security concerns must be communicated.

Conclusion

The diplomatic strain between India and Maldives, exacerbated during President Muizzu's tenure, primarily originates from the 'India Out' campaign, supported by China, which exploits anti-India sentiments fueled by political opportunism. This campaign, launched in late 2018 and intensified in mid-2020 through social media and physical protests, has been sustained by opposition parties till 2022, with covert backing from China. Muizzu's administration's derogatory remarks about Prime Minister Modi during his Lakshadweep visit further strained relations. Irrespective of the Muizzu's stand against India, a significant Maldivian population is in support of strong and closer relations with India. While the Muizzu administration may decrease future engagement with India, there is an anticipated

cautious approach toward closer engagement with China to avoid being caught in Sino-Indian competition. Although a significant deterioration in India-Maldives relations appears unlikely, challenges could arise if China gains greater influence. On the other hand, India should adopt proactive measures to address anti-India sentiments taking place on Maldivian soil.

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