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The Maldives' role as a buffer between India and China

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Maldives, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, and its complex relationships with its two major neighbours, India and China. Despite being the smallest South Asian nation, the Maldives holds significant importance due to its geographical position astride crucial sea lines of communication. Historically influenced by Dravidian settlers and later colonized by European powers, the Maldives gained independence in 1965 and transitioned to a democratic presidential republic. Its unique position has led to its emergence as a potential buffer state between the regional powers of India and China, a concept analyzed through historical and contemporary geopolitical lenses. The study delves into the intricacies of India-Maldives relations, characterized by historical, cultural, strategic, and economic ties, including defense cooperation and infrastructure projects. Simultaneously, it explores the burgeoning China-Maldives relationship, driven by China's 'string of pearls' strategy and significant investments in Maldivian infrastructure and trade. The paper critically assesses the Maldives' role as a buffer state, discussing its inherent challenges and advantages in navigating the competing interests of India and China. It further analyzes recent economic and infrastructural developments, including connectivity and tourism, and their implications for the Maldives' strategic positioning. The security and defense dynamics are also examined, highlighting maritime security concerns and collaborative efforts with regional powers. Finally, the paper discusses the regional and international implications of the Maldives' strategic role, considering its importance for the Indo-Pacific region and the concerns of major global players. The conclusion underscores the delicate balancing act the Maldives must perform to maintain its sovereignty amidst the shifting regional power dynamics and emphasizes the critical need for strategic policymaking to mitigate potential risks.

Keywords: Maldives, India, China, Indian Ocean, buffer state, asymmetric federalism, geopolitics, strategic relations, economic development, security dynamics.

Introduction

The name Maldives derives from the Sanskrit Maladvipa which means "garland of islands". In Tamil, the "garland of islands" can be translated as Malai Theevu. The first settlers in the Maldives were people of Dravidian origin. A strong layer of this Dravidian population and culture survives in Maldivian society with a clear Tamil-Malayalam substratum in the language. The Maldives is one of the world's most geographically dispersed countries as well as the smallest South Asian country by both land area and population around 4,28,000 inhabitants. But it is the geography of Maldives that makes it significant in the contested Arabian Sea part of the Indian Ocean. The Republic of the Maldives, made up of 26 atolls, is spread across the central, southwestern, and southern parts of the Indian Ocean. It is in a hugely significant position, as crossing this country will catalyze movement between the Middle East, East Africa, and South Asia. It lies just outside of the International Shipping Lane, and as one of the biggest high-end financial hubs in the world, it sees real principle of value (RPV) black, white, and grey value passing through it. The Maldives is also an important open sky for India. Long story short, the Maldives is potentially an important center in the Indian Ocean. In the 19th century, when the British colonized the Maldives, it became an important port for them to trade spices from Indonesia and tea and rubber from India/Sri Lanka into Europe, as well as the Persian Gulf and Somalia.

The Maldives' geographical location offers important insights into its relationships with its two neighboring powers: India in the northeast and China in the north over a stretch of only 2000 km.

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Connectivity and safeguarding encompass a large portion of their mutual relations. For any movement from Singapore-Suez Canal, the Maldivian path is beneficial for tankers and cargo. Moreover, oil supply to the Indian Defense forces in Karwar and Kochi must, or at least should, avail of one Maldivian entrance for safety. What further complicates matters is that the IMF and the World Bank both hold it as a study into the deep-water port and a bunkering-and-repair rendezvous point. China has built an airport on Hulhule and in 2018 gave a Chinese submarine near the airport. This proximity to the Indian civil and naval engineers and now the Chinese ability of the Kunming air base in China as a staging post is of concern to India.

Historical Background

The Maldivian islands had been under the colonial power of the Portuguese, the Nepalese, the British, and prior to that, under the British protectorate. Under colonial rule, the Maldives were vulnerable to external attacks, and their control over the waterways became beneficial for colonial powers.

Under the French and British colonial domains, the Maldives struggled to be a sovereign region. However, after talks between the French and British in the 1814 treaty, the region was guaranteed to be a sovereign nation. The Maldives were dealing with various internal issues, causing their government to ask the British government to become a Maldivian protectorate. This continued until 1966. After being a British protectorate, the Maldives declared independence from British rule on 26th July 1965, and then established a republic, moving away from the Indira-Gandhi supported monarchy to a socialistic presidency. In 2005, the Maldivian citizens voted to become a democratic presidential republic, hinting at going through European-style governance systems which were not based on theocratic principles. As a result, despite threats from conservative coups, the Maldives continued to actively pursue democratic values.

Considered the tiniest Islamic republic and vulnerable to external attacks, the Maldives has always been struggling to maintain an equilibrium with its superpower neighbors. Their location between two of the greatest world democracies, which are hosts to complex militia nationals, has caused the Maldives to be an exceptional regional entity. The Maldives has historically been dependent on Soviet, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and British forces for maritime security. Currently, the superpower nations in proximity to the Maldives could either violate the shared seas for resources or have a regional alliance. As a result, an alternative buffer strategy between the United Kingdom's great power India and nationalist China has shaped the rising Maldives with a developing strong partnership with the United Kingdom India states despite its realist nature.

Several factors have contributed to the way in which the Maldives as a state has developed over time. The first of these to be mentioned is its history of foreign dominance which still lives on in a variety of ways today, not the least of which is derived from the manner in which the colonial and independence era for the Maldives played out. Thus, there is a common perception in Maldivian society and in the foreigner's view of Maldives as a tourist paradise.

In pre-colonial times, the Maldives were a thriving trading state that interacted with and was under the influence of both Asian and Arab trading interests. Once colonized by

the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British in succession, its trade interests were gradually first marginalized, and finally betrayed. Tourism has continued in this vein from the beginning by catering to a narrow economic elite by exploiting a combination of sun, sand, infrequent contact with a minority of the divine bodies of uncommitted and transient foreign visitors.

The Maldives gained independence from Great Britain on July 26, 1965. From 1953 to 1968, the Maldives was a sultanate with H.E. Ibrahim Nasir as Sultan and H.E. Ahmed Fuard as Prime Minister. The Maldives then became a republic on November 11, 1968. The nation is currently led by the head of state H.E. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom and the head of government H.E. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom.

India-Maldives Relations

Given the Maldives' proximity to India and its increasing ties with China, the evolving dynamics of India-Maldives relations are of crucial importance. Ties between India and the Maldives are not premised on material interests alone but are a confluence of historical, geographical, strategic, and economic considerations. Indian origin signatories settled down in the Maldives in the 12th or 13th centuries, a section of the Maldivian population can trace their roots to the Indian state of Kerala. Historically, there have been extensive contacts between the Maldives and the southern part of India. Commercial links between the Indian region and the Maldives are said to have risen during the Chola Empire in the 11th century A.D. The Thoothukudi Port in the southern state of Tamil Nadu has been the juncture of maritime trade between India and the Maldives and even in contemporary times, over a decade ago, 24% of maritime trade of India was with the Maldives. A bid to consolidate ties took place in the post-colonial era. India was among the first to recognize Maldives' independence and formal diplomatic relations were established on November 1, 1965. Prior to that, the Maldives with little or no say in the Colombo Plan and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) activities chose to align itself with the Eastern Bloc and even joined the erstwhile USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) as a member of the non-aligned movement (NAM). Strategic jargons have had no headway in the Maldives, which has much stronger historical and emotional links with the southern states of India.

The bilateral engagement between India and Maldives has always been robust, as reflected in the multiple agreements and cooperation in areas such as trade and economic relations, fisheries, healthcare, education, tourism, among others. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1979 and the Maritime Agreement of 1982 are direct footprints of the benevolent nature of the bilateral exchanges. "Neighbors First" is a precept of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which benefits electronic tourist visas to Indian nationals, and there are over 22,000 Maldives workers in India. The steady progress in the bilateral relationship led to the establishment of the Integrated Cooperation between India and the Maldives (ICOIM) in 1986 under the stewardship of the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Despite widespread criticisms, Rajiv Gandhi's ICOIM institutionalized the bilateral ties in a more structured format to include meteorological, agricultural, and defense cooperation. The

Indian shrinking of an airstrip in the strategic Maldives is testament to its long-standing security collaboration. It keeps a close watch on the Northern atolls with additional ground-based radar and an air station at Addu atoll in the southern island of Gan constitutes a preventive bulwark against security threats. Mechanism to coordinate counter-terror operation has been occurring between NSG (National Security Guard) and the Maldivian Special Forces. Economically, the Maldives Global straddling shipping port in Kerala is a substantial breakthrough in the economic ties between southern India and Maldives.

Since the end of 2002, the discussions between India and the Maldives are increasingly dominated by advancing a "strategic partnership". Although it is not straightforward to provide a precise definition, at its core, the strategic relationship between India and the Maldives is a blueprint for achieving India's primary interest in the Maldives-security, with due attention to defense as well as geopolitical dimensions of that security. The discussions include reference to closer geographical and geopolitical alignments; strategic initiatives including special collaborative security, defense, and other sensitive and non-disclosable dimensions of security arrangements; strengthened military-to-military relationship for the security of the Maldives and the deterrence of potential challenges to that security and markets, technology and specialized training that can contribute to and reinforce such interests and commitments. It involves many interests, particularly the Maldives as an island, and the need to protect it from a range of contemporary security and defense challenges. Thus, the remainder of this section from now onwards discusses the policy endeavors related to security-based arrangements with those of a military and defense dimension.

The emerging structure of the India-Maldives security relationship encompassing various initiatives and accords is as many Indian diplomats describe it "the Navashakti that will guide Indian moves into the 21st century". For India, top priority now goes to the maritime defense relationship. The discussions for the Comprehensive Security Pact between India and the Maldives are at an advanced stage. The discussions on the Indian military presence in the Maldives, and the training and provision of coastal security, are likely to be the broad parameters of those discussions. Further, India plans to discard its "wait and watch" strategy and control the rearrangement of global capitalism from the Maldives. The Maldives would serve as the hub in India's plan to have her presence in the Indian Ocean.

China-Maldives Relations

Diplomatic and historic ties between the Maldives and China have spanned back 47 years. However, their recent diplomatic ties have evolved rapidly. For over a decade, China has sought to deepen relations with the island nation as part of its greater 'string of pearls' a maritime strategy that seeks to ensure the security of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean that China relies on for the importation of crucial natural resources. This strategy is both political and economic and justifies the creation of military and commercial relationships with different countries across the region.

In 2014, the Maldivian government declared that it no longer had a foreign policy, suggesting that its relations with foreign powers would be determined on a case-by-case basis. This was widely interpreted as evidence that the

Maldives would forge deeper partnerships with countries beyond Western nations like India, prospering when China emerged as a major organized donor and investor. Since the Maldives' rejection of the former policy, the two nations have invested heavily in mutual infrastructure and policy, particularly in commercial and fiscal interests.

Both countries have invested in economic projects on the other's soil despite their distance. For example, in November 2015, China made two landmark investments on two atolls in the Maldives. A 99 year lease was granted to the Maldivian government by China, relocating 1600 inhabitants in order to develop an international port in Feydhoo Finolhu. Another project was started by Alia for the construction and management of a bridge from Malé to the International Airport, which would boost connectivity. For about 10 years, China has overtaken India as the Maldives' second-major partner in trade in goods. Although trade has dipped in recent years, China's Foreign Ministry has announced that "investment collaborations" have been planned to enhance the Maldives' capacity to "secure its social and financial foundation".

The posture of Beijing's ties with Malé, in the Indian Ocean, is a relevant component to assess China-Maldives relations. This analysis isolates some of the construction seams of the rapprochement between the two countries, anticipating 2015. This allows the observer to eschew some of the distractions raised by more emotive recent frictions between Delhi and Malé. How, if at all, is Maldives relevant to the surrounding region in the broader calculus of Asia's emergent 21st Century political geography? It is relevant because of its status as a 'buffer' (or a possible buffer in the making) between India and China. This is a structural position, one determined by its geographic location, and it is an apt prism of inquiry that is unfortunately omitted by extant analyses of China-Maldives-India trilateral relations in the Indian Ocean.

The Maldives as a Buffer State

The concept of a buffer state is commonly used in geopolitics. Buffer states are situated between two countries, separated by a physical area of land or water. The relationship between buffer states and the states they separate varies across history and geography. The Maldives are surrounded by water but play the same role, especially between India and China. The term 'buffer', which first appeared in the 19th century, refers to an intended guard or a form of resistant element, while the study of buffer states further necessitates revision of the concept of a guardian in international relations. More specifically, the core functions of contemporary buffer protective states are more inclined to those of a buffer. As an identity state formed in the protective state matrix, the buffer nation strives to maintain its own safety and prosperity while catering to the interests of the king. For classical realists, the struggle is symbolic of the literal fight between good and evil. Buffer states assume the proscenium beside the traditional binary of the foe and the enemy, as defined by the character or the king itself.

A buffer state's relationship with its neighbors is marked by characteristics and responsibilities. First, buffer states are smaller or less powerful than the major powers in the region and may become protégées of a major power in their own right. It falls to the buffer state to adjust the relationships between great powers which will have an effect on the buffer's security. The buffer state will have to show a certain

neutrality when the great powers are competing among themselves. In the case of trade competition, however, the buffer would have to align itself with the successful major power. Finally, the country or state surrounding the buffer may become a historic core with which the buffer population is already deeply connected. For the Maldives as a buffer between India and China, the nature of both and their relationship becomes an important factor that decides the success or failure of the buffer payment. A mix of physical geography, history, culture and ethnicity, international relations, security needs, economic development needs, and strategic position of the Maldives. It highlights the scope of its mission and the challenges facing it.

The concept of a buffer state emerged in the early nineteenth century when geopolitics became a distinct field of knowledge. There is no one standard definition of a buffer state. However, a careful examination of several definitions suggests some characteristics that are generally considered common to most buffer states. Buffer states are usually small, neutral countries located between two or larger rivals and/or enemies. Essentially, they function as a physical and detached barrier between them. The smaller and weaker buffer states are in terms of both physical size and geopolitical significance the better they can serve as a buffer.

Serving as a buffer state has its own challenges and advantages. On the one hand, for a small state, forming and preserving alliances can be costly because states highly value their small allies and may regard them as disproportionately important. Twice in the first half of the twentieth century, Maldives had strategic and geopolitical value, although the history of Maldives had been shaped by this value from the fifteenth century. Buffer states have very limited room for maneuver in foreign policy and must learn to balance the symptom rather than the cause of fear. In today's regional dynamics, India is in a totally defensive position; economically, militarily, politically and strategically, India cannot capitalize on anyone to create a balance of power against China. If Maldives becomes a buffer state like Nepal or Bhutan, India stands to lose huge security, strategic, economic, and diplomatic interests of dealing with Maldives.

Economic and Infrastructural Developments

The Maldivian President, to redraw ties with India, is arguing that the Maldives acts as a strategic intermediary to keep the hulking geopolitical entities, India and China, from colliding into each other. In Beijing, it is believed that the inflow of Chinese transnational funds has made the Maldives vulnerable to Indian intervention, and therefore they must build military strongholds in the Maldives to be present in the region and prevent such intervention. To better understand and unpack these strategic dynamics, I believe it is important to look at relevant contemporary economic and infrastructural developments at a granular level. There are, in turn, two key areas of cooperation to look at, both of which the current government identifies as crucial to the Maldivian economy: connectivity and tourism. The 1,000-odd islands that make up the Maldives stretch over 90,000 km² of the Indian Ocean, nearly 50 times the size of Beijing. From Malé to the northern city of Haa Dhaalu, it is only 301 km. Hithadhoo, a southern atoll, is just 3 km away from India's Lakshadweep islands to the

north. Nearly a third of all Maldivian people live in Malé concurrently. And nearly half of them live on the congested artificial island of Hulhumalé next door. The Maldivian economy is a very divergent collection of natural resources. Surrounding the country is 21% of global tuna lairs. But today, the top contributor to Malé's coffers is tourism. Three million visits are made to the atolls of Alif Alif, Ari and Dhaalu each year. The white sands and postcard-perfect sunsets provide US\$2.6 billion in annual revenue. China has made tourism a strategic flagship issue.

In the Maldives, Indian and Chinese projects cover various sectors. Apart from infrastructure and economic-centric sectors, these projects also incorporate intergovernmental security. Projects that the Maldives has entered with the Indian government include cooperation in military and infrastructure. The Maldives and India entered into multiple defense agreements between 2009 and 2016, including an agreement on defense cooperation in 2009. The UPA government signed a contract to install radar systems at six locations in the Maldives in February 2011. In 2013, the anti-piracy pact was agreed.

Park Resort Holdings seized GMR to conserve the airport in the Maldives, which had previously been leased to GMR's Ibrahim Nasir International Airport Limited (INIA). The Singapore court handed a verdict favoring GMR's injunction in 2012, after a Maldives court rescinded the INIA's bid for the management and Development Leasing (MDL) to GMR and the government canceled the Maldives government's compensation deal. This compounded the same Indian perception that they have no role in the Indian Ocean. Maldives was embittered against India when India offered assistance to the Maldives while aligning the multilateral military environment at the end of INIA. The air was cleared up after a series of phone calls between officials at the highest level in both countries in 2018 and President Solih. One of the major concerns of Maldives management, which would also form a corridor to change the country's geopolitical role, historically part of India's responsibility or influence, is the result of the projects that were rejected and the consequences of reversing the contract. India proposed a second project to accomplish the same when the Maldives opposed India's radar system. India considered financing a "coastal radar system" in 2011 in the Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands via Radar & Networking (CNR) and Radar (SRS) systems.

Security and Defense Dynamics

The 'Security and Defense Dynamics' section sheds light on the security and defense dynamics in the Maldives. It looks at the maritime security and strategic partnerships that have played a crucial role in the defense of the country. Another part of the section deals with regional implications of these collaborative efforts. It also highlights the cooperation among India, the United States, and Australia in safeguarding the maritime interests of the Maldives. Thus, given their importance in maintaining the security of the Maldives, it appears that Malé views these countries as 'protectors' of its national interests.

The Maldives is geographically located at the center of a region essential to the global economic and security order, and India and the Maldives have frequently expressed the willingness to sustain historical relations, including security cooperation to ensure the safety and stability of the Indian Ocean. Over the years, two foundational agreements

establishing a security partnership have underscored the importance of security cooperation. The present era of enhanced mechanization, brought about in part due to globalization and geopolitical change, has led to an increase in the vulnerability and sensitivity of the islands' maritime boundaries. Protecting the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has also taken importance due to an additional security challenge within the expanding maritime zone without adequate naval, coast guard, or marine resources. The first agreement with India was made during the Maumoon Abdul Gayoom presidency, which was renewed, altered, and adapted to circumstances in 2017. This security agreement was enhanced at a time when India and China were in a confrontational mode.

Maritime security is now a vital concern due to the Maldives' geography, which consists of twenty-six atolls and more than twelve hundred islands over a length of 820 km from north to south and 120 km from east to west in the Indian Ocean. Maritime threats like narco-trafficking, human trafficking, weapons and illegal migrants smuggling, and human trafficking in the broader security and defense are included. To defend against these threats, the Maldives Marine Police, Maldives National Defence Force, and other organizations are implementing various multi-disciplinary anti-piracy, search and rescue, counter-terrorism, and port control measures. Major initiatives for future maritime security operations in the Southern Indian Ocean mostly focus on enhancing maritime security.

A network of coastal radar systems in the Maldives with foreign assistance is being operated by a new coast guard division. In 2018, local police were encouraged to carry out anti-narco-trafficking operations when the revenue service police were established. The Maldives began opening multiple overseas defense, confiscation, and reporting bases in 2017. The Maldives Coast Guard enhanced its ability to patrol greater distances by purchasing six interdiction high-speed vessels in 2020, in addition to four other vessels ordered in 2019. The border security systems deliver an exclusive viewpoint that no single study has ever reported with earlier procedures. The Maldives' efforts at creating good links to main regional powers, such as India, are a useful indicator of the nation as a shield.

The latest base for Maldives Coast Guards is a Dornier aircraft, which is one of the most effective equipment for MDP that wants new aircraft for missions throughout the country. This suggests that southern Maldives store and refueling services could currently be available to Dornier aircraft. Interceptor attempts are intensely symbolic when the Maldives is located in the northern part of the main sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that transmit China's power to and from the Suez Canal. To deter Indian investment, the southern entry of the Laccadive Sea/Ramsar/Suez Canal, also outside of its territory, China. The significance of the Maldives as the entry to the Indian Ocean is demonstrated by two large Maldivian Outer Islands with a coast guard presence being Indian Navy and Navy.

Regional and International Implications

It is important to understand the regional and international implications of the Maldives' role as a buffer between regional and world powers. As a zone of interaction and pathways of numerous sea lines of communication that link the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Maldives is important for

the Indo-Pacific region. It has also undoubtedly emerged as a major issue for India, which worries whether the Chinese military will use the atoll for military operations to encircle the subcontinent from two ends. For China, in case of Indian military presence, the Maldives will keep reminding about China's vulnerability to Indian military presence in the east because of the Sino-Pakistan defense cooperation in the region. Although the Maldives is scarcely significant for the major world powers like the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and even Russia, profoundly it should have major implications as these nations have stakes in the region and are seeking bases in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the dynamics of littoral states like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and others in relation to the Maldivian decisions have made the region intensely interconnected and the Maldivians concerned about the influencing medium-sized countries.

The Maldives constitutes a zone of interface between the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. It is also located east of the narrower Horn of Africa's choke points: Bab-el-Mandeb in the southwest and the Gulf of Aden in the northeast. Once the Chinese are in the Maldives, the influence in raw material-rich East Africa will be three times faster. With such strategic and natural importance, the Maldives will be of importance for most of the world's powers, especially the adversary global-regional powers. Given the interconnecting effect on the regional dynamics, the Indian Ocean, like the Arabian Sea and the Gulf, has become important for the world, including Afghanistan, China, Central Asia, and India.

The analysis about the Maldives' function as a buffer state has predominantly dwelled on its consequences for the Indian Ocean region. Though such reasoning does not paint the whole picture, it is evident that any political instability in the Maldives triggers security problems in the larger strategic arc stretching from East Africa to Southeast Asia. With this in mind, four closely interlinked aspects of this larger geography are crucial to grasp the Maldives' potential as a buffer state. The first entitles the Indian Ocean region as an area of Indian primacy, increasingly transformed into a Sino-Indian traditional balance of power system. Hence, how the Maldives is connected to the Indian balance-of-power coalition is relevant. Second, the political situation in the Maldives has the exclusive capacity to directly threaten or disrupt the SLOC (sea lines of communications), which is perceived as critical for India, China, and other regional maritime power.

Furthermore, acting as an intermediary, the Maldives could impact a range of regional security constituents like naval cooperation amongst different states, Indian Ocean territorial corridors, freedom of navigation and over flight, and regional energy transit pacts. Third, the Maldives lie within an organization-rich locus inclusive of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) bloc, more recently acting as the representative of nine Indian Ocean Small Island Developing Countries. As a result, the strategic implications of Colombo's international positioning have an impact on regional diplomacy and the upholding of stable balance status years in the making. Finally, the Maldives being a tourist haven filled with immigrants from China is cherished by Beijing. Political disruptions in the Maldives would threaten to impact this vibrant fabric, riling up other actors who might like to see Beijing get the boot.

Future Prospects

The Maldives' role as a buffer is subject to the regional dynamics that surround it. While geography explains the Maldives' regional role, the strength of regional powers like India and China, and their evolving relationship, plays an important role in how the Maldives and its role are perceived in dramatically different ways in New Delhi and Beijing. Successful strategizing will ensure that downside risk like the Maldives becoming a point of readjustment for the ever-changing regional power equation can be managed to avoid consequences that would adversely affect Maldivian sovereignty.

Economic development and human capital are the two most important areas for the Maldives to prosper and shed aspects of its status as a "precarious state". Issues related to the Maldives' identity as a buffer state, its foreign policies, its strategic choices, and the risks it faces from playing the role are likely to become increasingly important over the coming decade. Since 2004, Sri Lanka's strategic choices have fundamentally transformed, pointing towards a closer security and economic relationship with China, at the expense of its relationship with India. It is not clear whether the Maldives can pursue such a strategy on its own without facing significant negative externalities, including destabilizing ethnic polarization, political violence, and an undermining of the 1938 best concession. The Maldives continues to face existential sovereign risks regardless of leadership personality or the international vision of its leader. The Maldives can never offer any single major external power absolute strategic security dominance. In projecting normative leadership and ethical foreign policy behavior, it can only be a small influencer of decisions made elsewhere that impinge on its sovereignty and interests. To enable the Maldives bigger space in an unfriendly world, it needs a big ally, and by default, India is the only choice. In projecting its swing power values often publicized by the MCP and the MDP, it will equally have to take on board policy compromises. It is not possible to have it both ways. Over the next decade, India's predominance in the region will dramatically fade, and India will become an external power vying for influence in a very different region and security environment than the one it has historically known.

The discussion on the historical and contemporary similarities and differences of small and middle powers provides a cautious foreseeing on the future prospects of the Maldives, a state placed strategically between two emerging titans, India and China. The challenges that lie ahead, however, are also opportunities that might be used and exploited. The competing interests of both New Delhi and Beijing in the Indian Ocean are leading them to pursue a bilateral stratagem and turn to the small middle-ring states like the Maldives, demonstrating that the Maldives is still able to play an intermediary role in great power or middle power relations.

Multiple diplomatic, economic and security concerns are foreseen for the Maldives in the future. On the other hand, a number of development potentialities are also foreseen, such as the prospect of operating as a fulcrum and a buffer state, economic dividends from being placed in such a position, a source of employment and revenue, and developmental prospects. From the dueling propositions of challenges and opportunities, it is clear that the Maldives has the potential to greatly benefit from regional cooperation. However, to handle this difficult balance, the Maldives will require the

active and concerted efforts of all states concerned to scheme and cooperate on issues where all can agree to do so, such as climate change, since they are all uniformly impacted, for the greater economic and social interests of the Asian Ocean.

Conclusion

The geo-political importance of the Indian Ocean Region and the strategic location of the Maldives provide huge opportunities for China, and consequently, pose severe tensions and challenges for India. Since the Modi led BJP government came into power in 2014, China is flexing its muscles to encircle New Delhi with the help of India's neighbors, because Beijing's main intension is to control India's increasing influence in the region. Moreover, Maldives has been a close friend of India, however, during the Abdulla Yameen's government; China has hugely invested in the small island nation. In other words, the Maldivian President sought the financial assistance for the development of the country that is why; he allowed the Chinese investments for the sake of growth of the physical infrastructures. Now, Maldives has seriously been entangled in the China's "Debt trap" policy that would be very difficult for Maldives to return back. In return of Chinese investments, Beijing has acquired enough space to be physically present for a long time in Maldives. Now India perceives the Chinese threats directly in its backyard in the Indian Ocean region. The new elected government in Male, led by Ibrahim Solih, gives a sigh of relief for New Delhi that India-Maldives relations will be improved under his leadership, because he is known as a friend of India. But, on the other hand, the transformation of power in Male, China is consciously watching and continuously trying to make pressure on the elected new government to follow the agreements made by the previous regime. Now India has to maintain its relations with the island nation in terms of whether financial support or political support. In addition to this, India must also develop faith in relations with its neighbourhood countries, though it is a two-way process, however, it is also responsibility of the neighbour countries.

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