



Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean: India-Maldives Relations in the Shadow of China

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Abstract: The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a crucial geopolitical chessboard, attracting the attention of major global and regional powers. At the heart of this evolving dynamic lies the Maldives, an archipelagic nation strategically positioned along critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). This paper examines the intricate and often fluctuating relationship between India and the Maldives, specifically through the lens of China's burgeoning influence in the IOR. Historically, India has been the primary security provider and development partner for the Maldives, fostering deep cultural, economic, and strategic ties. However, China's "String of Pearls" strategy, characterized by significant infrastructure investments and growing diplomatic engagement, has introduced a new dimension to Maldivian foreign policy, leading to periods of discernible tilt towards Beijing. This paper analyses the historical evolution of India-Maldives relations, identifies the drivers and manifestations of China's growing presence, and explores the implications of this triangular dynamic for regional stability and India's security interests. It argues that while the Maldives seeks to maximize its strategic autonomy by balancing both regional giants, the increasing assertiveness of China poses a persistent challenge to India's traditional pre-eminence and necessitates a nuanced, robust, and adaptive foreign policy approach from New Delhi.

Key Words: Indian Ocean, Geopolitics, India, Maldives, China, String of Pearls, Maritime Security, Strategic Autonomy, Bilateral Relations.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Indian Ocean, a vast expanse of water connecting the energy-rich Middle East with the dynamically growing economies of East Asia, holds immense geostrategic significance in the 21st century. It serves as a vital conduit for global trade, particularly oil and gas, with over 80% of the world's seaborne oil and trade transiting through its waters¹. Within this critical maritime domain, the Maldives, a small island nation comprising over 1,200 islands, occupies a pivotal geographical location. Situated astride major international shipping lanes, the archipelago is not only a popular tourist destination but also a strategic asset for any power seeking to project influence in the IOR.

Historically, the Maldives has maintained a close and multifaceted relationship with India, its closest neighbour. This relationship, spanning centuries, is characterized by shared cultural heritage, economic interdependence, and India's consistent role as a first responder and security guarantor. However, in recent decades, the rise of China as a global power and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have introduced a new element into the Maldivian foreign policy calculus. China's growing economic and strategic footprint in the IOR, often described as the "String of Pearls" strategy, has brought Beijing into direct competition with New Delhi for influence over smaller island nations like the Maldives². This burgeoning rivalry has led to periods of fluctuating allegiances in Male, creating a complex geopolitical environment for India. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitics in the Indian Ocean, focusing specifically on the evolving India-Maldives relations in the shadow of China's expanding presence. It will delve into the historical context of India-Maldives ties, examine the motivations and manifestations of China's engagement, and assess the implications of this triangular dynamic for regional stability and India's strategic interests. The paper argues that understanding the Maldives' strategic decisions, often driven by a desire for strategic autonomy and economic development, is crucial for both India and China as they navigate their respective roles in the IOR.

2. The Strategic Significance of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean:

The Maldives, despite its small landmass and population, commands outsized strategic importance due to its unique geography. The archipelago is located in close proximity to critical SLOCs that connect the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca, through which a significant portion of global trade and energy supplies pass.



Control or influence over the Maldives, therefore, offers substantial advantages in terms of maritime domain awareness, surveillance, and potential strategic access in a contested maritime environment.

For India, the Maldives is an integral part of its "Neighbourhood First" policy and its broader vision for security and growth in the region. Its proximity to India's western coast means that any instability or hostile presence in the Maldives could directly impact India's security. Furthermore, a substantial portion of India's external trade and energy imports transit through the SLOCs in the vicinity of the Maldives, underscoring its economic significance. India views the Maldives as a crucial partner in maintaining regional peace and security and has historically acted as its primary security provider, as demonstrated during the 1988 coup attempt (Operation Cactus) where Indian forces intervened to restore the legitimate government.

For China, the Maldives represents a key "pearl" in its ambitious "String of Pearls" strategy³. This strategy aims to secure China's energy and trade routes by establishing a network of port facilities and diplomatic relationships across the IOR. By investing heavily in Maldivian infrastructure, particularly airports and bridges, China seeks to enhance its logistical capabilities and extend its reach into a region historically dominated by India. While Beijing consistently emphasizes the commercial and peaceful nature of its investments, strategic analysts in India and the West view these initiatives with caution, perceiving them as potential dual-use facilities that could serve military purposes in the future.

3. India–Maldives Relations: A Historical Perspective and Evolving Dynamics

The relationship between India and the Maldives is deeply rooted in shared history, culture, and mutual respect. India was among the first nations to recognize the Maldives' independence in 1965 and has since maintained robust diplomatic ties.

Pillars of the Relationship:

Historical and Cultural Ties: Centuries of interaction have fostered strong cultural and linguistic connections between the two nations, with Maldivians sharing Dravidian origins and historical links to Southern India.

Economic Partnership: India has been a significant economic partner, providing essential commodities, financial assistance, and infrastructure development aid. The Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP), a major India-funded initiative, aims to improve connectivity within the Maldivian archipelago. India also emerged as Maldives' largest trade partner in 2023.

Security Cooperation: India has traditionally played the role of a net security provider for the Maldives. Beyond Operation Cactus, ongoing defence cooperation includes joint military exercises (e.g., "Ekuverin," "Dosti," "Ekatha," "Operation Shield") and training for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), with India fulfilling a substantial portion of their training needs. India also provides humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), as demonstrated during the 2004 Tsunami and a water crisis in Male.

Recent Challenges and Policy Swings:

Despite these strong foundations, India-Maldives relations have experienced periods of strain and policy reversals, particularly in recent years. These fluctuations are often linked to changes in Maldivian political leadership and the increasing geopolitical competition between India and China.

"India Out" Campaign: A notable challenge has been the "India Out" campaign, a political movement in the Maldives that views the Indian military presence as a threat to Maldivian sovereignty. This campaign gained significant traction during the presidency of Mohamed Muizzu, who made the withdrawal of Indian military personnel a key part of his election campaign.

Muizzu Administration's Pivot: The election of President Muizzu in 2023 marked a more pronounced shift towards China. His administration initiated the process of replacing Indian military personnel with civilians and did not extend a joint hydrological survey agreement with India. Simultaneously, Muizzu's visit to China in early 2024 saw the signing of several key infrastructure agreements, further solidifying ties with Beijing.

Balancing Act: While the Muizzu government has seemingly leaned towards China, there are also indications of an attempt to maintain a balance. Maldivian Defence Minister Ghassan Maumoon acknowledged India's role as a first



responder during crises, and ongoing India-funded projects continue. The Maldives' policy swings are often necessitated by its economic deficiencies and a desire to leverage external support while safeguarding its sovereignty.

China's Expanding Footprint in the Indian Ocean and the Maldives:

China's engagement in the Indian Ocean Region has grown exponentially over the past two decades, driven by a combination of economic imperatives and strategic ambitions⁴.

Drivers of China's Indian Ocean Strategy:

Energy Security: China is heavily reliant on seaborne energy imports, with a significant portion transiting through the IOR. Protecting these SLOCs is a primary objective for Beijing.

Trade and Economic Expansion: As a global manufacturing hub, China's vast trade network relies on secure maritime routes. The BRI, including the Maritime Silk Road component, aims to enhance connectivity and facilitate trade across the IOR, linking China with Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

Blue-Water Navy Ambitions: China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is rapidly expanding its capabilities and reach, transitioning from a "near-coast defence" to a "near seas control" and eventually a "blue-water navy" doctrine. A presence in the IOR is essential for projecting power and protecting its growing overseas interests.

Countering Regional Influence: China's growing presence is also seen as an effort to counter the influence of traditional powers like India and the United States in the region.

Manifestations of China's Influence in the Maldives:

China's engagement with the Maldives has been characterized by significant investments in infrastructure and growing diplomatic and defence ties:

Infrastructure Development: China has become a major financier and developer of infrastructure projects in the Maldives. Notable projects include the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge (Sinamale Bridge) connecting Male to Hulhule and Hulhumale, housing projects, and airport expansion. These projects, while contributing to Maldivian development, often come with substantial loans, raising concerns about "debt-trap diplomacy".

Increased Diplomatic Engagement: High-level visits and diplomatic exchanges between China and the Maldives have become more frequent, particularly under the Muizzu administration.

Emerging Defence Ties: While less overt than economic ties, there are growing indications of nascent defence cooperation. Reports of Chinese research vessels in Maldivian waters and concerns about potential dual-use facilities underscore the strategic dimension of their relationship. In 2024, the Maldives also signed a defence pact with China.

Tourism and Trade: China is a significant source of tourists for the Maldives, and while trade between the two nations is still modest compared to India, it is growing.

Implications for Regional Stability and India's Security Interests:

The evolving geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean, characterized by China's growing presence and its impact on India-Maldives relations, carries significant implications for regional stability and India's security.

India's Concerns:

Erosion of Traditional Influence: India views the Maldives as part of its immediate strategic backyard. China's increasing footprint is perceived as an attempt to erode India's traditional pre-eminence and create a "string of pearls" that could potentially encircle India.

Maritime Security Challenges: Any potential military or dual-use facility established by China in the Maldives could pose a direct threat to India's maritime security. This would allow China to enhance its intelligence gathering, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities in the IOR, impacting India's freedom of navigation and strategic.



Challenging India's "Net Security Provider" Role: China's growing security engagement with the Maldives, including defence pacts, could challenge India's long-standing role as the primary security guarantor in the region.

Debt Vulnerability and Political Influence: India is concerned that the Maldives' reliance on Chinese loans for infrastructure projects could lead to debt vulnerability, potentially giving Beijing undue political leverage over Male's foreign policy decisions.

Maldives' Strategic Balancing Act:

For the Maldives, navigating the interests of two powerful neighbours is a delicate balancing act aimed at maximizing its own strategic autonomy and development needs⁵.

Economic Development: The Maldives, a small island nation heavily reliant on tourism, seeks foreign investment to diversify its economy and build crucial infrastructure. China's rapid and large-scale investments offer a compelling alternative or supplement to traditional partners.

Strategic Autonomy: By engaging with both India and China, the Maldives attempts to avoid over-reliance on a single power and maintain its sovereignty. This allows Male to leverage competition for better development deals and diversify its strategic partnerships.

Domestic Political Considerations: Internal political dynamics in the Maldives often play a significant role in foreign policy shifts. Anti-India sentiments, fuelled by nationalist narratives, can sometimes be exploited for electoral gains, as seen with the "India Out" campaign.

Regional Dynamics:

The India-Maldives-China dynamic also impacts the broader regional geopolitical landscape in several significant ways:

Increased Competition and Militarization: The rivalry between India and China in the IOR could lead to increased militarization of the region, potentially impacting freedom of navigation and regional stability. This competition is evident in the rapid naval modernization efforts of both countries, with new warships and submarines being commissioned, signalling their determination to assert influence.

Impact on Other Smaller Island Nations: The Maldives' experience serves as a precedent and a case study for other small island states in the Indian Ocean. These nations, often characterized by economic vulnerabilities, exposure to climate change, and vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), are increasingly becoming arenas for major power contests. The heightened strategic competition provides them with opportunities to renegotiate ties, diversify partnerships, and leverage their strategic locations to secure concessions from competing powers. However, it also exposes them to the risks of becoming pawns in a larger geopolitical game and facing difficult choices between powerful patrons.

Rise of New Alliances and Partnerships: The intensifying rivalry is accelerating the formation of new strategic alignments and strengthening existing ones. India has significantly deepened its partnerships with like-minded countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia through platforms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The Quad, though informal, aims to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific, counterbalancing China's assertive manoeuvres. Similarly, European powers like France and the UK are increasing their maritime presence and defence cooperation with India.

Shifting Security Architectures: The traditional security architecture of the IOR, where India historically played the dominant security provider role, is undergoing a profound transformation. China's growing military capabilities and its pursuit of a "blue-water navy" are compelling a reassessment of regional defence strategies and prompting greater naval deployments by various actors. This could lead to a more congested and contested maritime space, increasing the potential for miscalculation or accidental escalation⁶.

Economic Corridors and Dependencies: Beyond direct trade routes, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is creating new economic dependencies. While offering infrastructure development, these projects often come with substantial debt, potentially granting Beijing significant economic and political leverage over recipient nations. This can alter trade



flows, create reliance on Chinese imports, and shift economic power balances within the region, moving beyond traditional commercial interests to deeper strategic influence⁷.

Environmental Security as a Shared Challenge and Battleground: The Indian Ocean region faces severe environmental security threats, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, marine pollution, and overfishing. For low-lying island nations like the Maldives, these are existential threats. While these challenges necessitate regional cooperation, the great power competition can also turn environmental security into a new battleground for influence. Nations are increasingly using climate resilience aid and disaster relief as tools for strategic engagement, aiming to demonstrate commitment and build goodwill, even as effective region-wide collaborative mechanisms for environmental security remain underdeveloped.

India's Response and Way Forward:

To counter China's growing influence and preserve its strategic interests in the Maldives, India has adopted a multi-pronged, sophisticated, and adaptive approach, rooted in its "Neighbourhood First" policy and its broader vision for a secure and prosperous Indian Ocean Region⁸.

Robust Diplomacy and Strategic Engagement:

"Neighbourhood First" and "SAGAR" Vision: India continues to prioritize its "Neighbourhood First" policy, which positions its immediate neighbours, including the Maldives, at the forefront of its foreign policy. This is complemented by its "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) vision, which emphasizes maritime security, capacity building, and economic cooperation across the IOR. This holistic approach seeks to reassure neighbours of India's benign intentions and its commitment to collective regional well-being.

High-Level Engagements: Despite periods of strain, India has maintained consistent high-level diplomatic engagement with the Maldives. The recent visits of Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Khaleel to India (May 2025) and previous meetings of the High-Level Core Group (HLCG) underscore the ongoing dialogue and efforts to review and implement the "Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership" adopted by both leaders. These frequent exchanges aim to build trust, address concerns directly, and keep communication channels open, demonstrating India's unwavering commitment to the relationship.

Strategic Dialogue and Reassurance: India's diplomatic efforts focus on reassuring Male of its respect for Maldivian sovereignty and independence, directly addressing the "India Out" narrative. By replacing military personnel operating aerial platforms with civilians, for instance, India has shown flexibility and a willingness to accommodate Maldivian sensitivities while ensuring continued essential services like medical evacuations. This careful calibration aims to distinguish India's engagement from any perceived neo-colonial or exploitative tendencies.

Deepening Development Cooperation and Economic Assistance:

Grant-in-Aid Projects and Concessional Loans: India remains a significant development partner, providing both grants and concessional loans for a wide array of projects crucial to Maldivian socio-economic development. Recent agreements in May 2025 saw the signing of 13 MoUs under the High Impact Community Development Scheme (HICDP) Phase III, amounting to an MVR 100 million grant, primarily focused on enhancing ferry services, connectivity, and community livelihoods across the islands. These projects are directly aligned with the needs articulated by the Maldivian government, underscoring a responsive partnership model.

Major Connectivity and Infrastructure Initiatives: Beyond the HICDP, flagship projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP), a significant India-funded initiative, continue to advance. This project aims to transform inter-island connectivity, which is vital for Maldivian economic growth and decentralization. India's approach often involves providing robust, long-term infrastructure that fosters sustainable development, in contrast to concerns about potential "debt traps" associated with some other foreign investments.



Financial Stability and Support: India has provided crucial financial assistance to the Maldives, including a \$100 million subscription to Maldivian T-bills and a \$400 million currency swap arrangement. These measures are vital for stabilizing the Maldivian economy, managing its debt, and reducing its dependency on other foreign currencies, directly addressing a key vulnerability of the island nation. Discussions are also underway for a local currency settlement agreement to further reduce dollar dependence.

Trade and Investment Diversification: India emerged as Maldives' largest trade partner in 2023, reflecting a growing economic interdependence. India is actively exploring a Bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and promoting Indian investments in diverse sectors, including the blue economy, fisheries, and tourism, to further integrate the two economies and offer alternatives to other external dependencies.

Enhancing Security Cooperation and Maritime Domain Awareness:

Continued Defence Training and Exercises: India remains the primary training partner for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), fulfilling a substantial portion of their defence training requirements. Joint military exercises such as "Ekuverin," "Dosti," and "Ekatha" are routinely conducted to enhance interoperability, counter-terrorism capabilities, and build mutual confidence.

Maritime Surveillance and Capacity Building: India consistently supports the Maldives in strengthening its maritime security capabilities. This includes providing radar systems, patrol vessels, and other critical equipment for enhanced surveillance and monitoring of its vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This support is crucial for combating illegal fishing, piracy, and drug trafficking, directly contributing to the Maldives' national security.

First Responder in Crises: India's consistent role as a "first responder" during crises, from the 1988 coup attempt (Operation Cactus) to the 2004 Tsunami and the 2014 Male water crisis, reinforces its image as a reliable and compassionate security partner. This rapid humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) strengthens goodwill and demonstrates India's tangible commitment to Maldivian well-being.

Developing Regional Security Architectures: India actively promotes and participates in regional security mechanisms like the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), which includes the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. These platforms facilitate intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and collaborative efforts to address common maritime security challenges, creating a shared security framework for the Indian Ocean.

Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy:

Countering Disinformation: India recognizes the importance of robust public diplomacy to counter anti-India narratives and misinformation campaigns, such as the "India Out" movement. This involves highlighting the tangible benefits of Indian assistance, the non-interference principle of its foreign policy, and the deep cultural and historical bonds that transcend political fluctuations.

People-to-People Connect: Fostering stronger people-to-people ties remains a cornerstone. This includes promoting tourism from India, facilitating educational opportunities for Maldivian students in India, and providing accessible healthcare services, all of which build enduring connections and goodwill at the societal level. India aims to be the preferred destination for Maldivians seeking education, medical treatment, and employment.

Cultural Exchange Programs: Cultural exchanges and shared heritage initiatives help to reinforce the deep-rooted connections between the two nations, promoting understanding and appreciation of each other's traditions.

Multilateral Engagement and Broader IOR Strategy:

Leveraging Regional Forums: India utilizes various regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) to promote collective security, economic integration, and sustainable development. These platforms allow India to engage with a wider array of partners and build consensus on regional challenges.



Collaboration with Like-Minded Partners (Quad): India's engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – comprising the United States, Japan, and Australia – is a crucial component of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. While not directly focused on the Maldives, the Quad aims to ensure a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, which indirectly counters China's growing assertiveness in the IOR and provides a larger strategic umbrella for regional partners⁹.

Developing Alternate Connectivity and Influence: India is proactively investing in infrastructure projects in other Indian Ocean littorals, such as the Chabahar Port in Iran and the upgraded airstrip and jetty on Agalega Islands in Mauritius. These initiatives are part of India's "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy, designed to enhance its strategic reach, diversify trade routes, and offer alternatives to China-led projects, thereby maintaining a balance of power in the region.

Focus on Blue Economy and Environmental Resilience: Recognizing the shared vulnerability to climate change, India is increasingly focusing on cooperation in the blue economy, sustainable fishing, and climate resilience initiatives with IOR states, including the Maldives. This aligns with Maldivian priorities and presents a positive narrative of partnership on shared existential threats.

By combining proactive diplomacy, significant development assistance, robust security cooperation, astute public diplomacy, and strategic multilateral engagement, India aims to reinforce its position as the preferred and most reliable partner for the Maldives, ensuring its continued influence and safeguarding its critical security interests in the strategically vital Indian Ocean.

4. Conclusion:

The Indian Ocean remains a critical arena for geopolitical competition, with the Maldives at its strategic nexus. The intricate dance between India, the Maldives, and China is a microcosm of the broader power dynamics unfolding in the IOR. While India possesses historical ties, geographical proximity, and a track record as a reliable partner, China's economic might and strategic ambitions present a formidable challenge.

The Maldives, as a small island developing state, will continue to seek diverse partnerships to advance its national interests and safeguard its sovereignty. Its foreign policy will likely remain characterized by a pragmatic balancing act, leveraging the opportunities presented by both India and China. For India, a sustained and nuanced approach is essential. This includes not only strengthening existing bilateral ties through continued development assistance and security cooperation but also engaging in robust public diplomacy to counter narratives that undermine its interests. India must demonstrate its commitment as a reliable and non-coercive partner, respecting Maldivian sovereignty while subtly reinforcing its indispensable role in the archipelago's security and prosperity. Ultimately, the future of India–Maldives relations in the shadow of China will depend on India's ability to adapt its foreign policy to the evolving geopolitical realities of the Indian Ocean, ensuring that its historical goodwill translates into enduring strategic influence.

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