

China and the Maldives: Lessons from the Indian Ocean's New Battleground

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Maldives, which straddles key trading lanes of the Indian Ocean, has become a new battleground in an escalating struggle between China and India in South Asia.

China's footprint in the Maldives has grown exponentially in recent years, with accusations it has promoted corruption, predatory lending, and undermined democratic governance.

The U.S. government should increase assistance to the Maldives, offer Male economic alternatives, and coordinate Maldives policy with India.

For the past several years, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean has become a regular feature in international headlines. Time and again, Sri Lanka has been displayed as an example of the dark underbelly of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious, multibillion-dollar connectivity corridor spanning half the globe. A series of infrastructure deals shrouded in corruption and secrecy, China's construction of a commercially questionable port in Hambantota, and the transfer of control of the port to a Chinese entity when Sri Lanka was unable to repay its loans have been presented as a model case study in Chinese "debt trap diplomacy" and the risks of the BRI.

A few hundred miles to the west lies another Indian Ocean island nation, the Maldives, whose experience with China and the BRI has received less publicity but bears some uncanny resemblances to Sri Lanka's.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3546>

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Naturally, there are also some important differences. There is no evidence of secret, sovereignty-violating provisions inserted in Chinese infrastructure deals in the Maldives as there were in Sri Lanka. Despite ample speculation, China has not assumed control over any sensitive port facilities in the Maldives and, to date, there is no evidence China has any explicit military designs for the island chain. Admittedly, some Chinese infrastructure projects have been valuable, including a bridge connecting the capital, Male, to the nearby island housing the Maldives' main international airport.

However, as this review of China's engagement with the Maldives reveals, there are also some concerning parallels. It presents the story of a country that drifted further into China's orbit in recent years amid bouts of political instability. One that assumed large, non-transparent Chinese loans for infrastructure and saw a sharp rise in Chinese debt. One where deepening engagement with China has posed new challenges to the country's democratic and liberal institutions. One where a new government has struggled to get an accurate accounting of how much debt is owed to Beijing and how many projects China has active in the country. Finally, it is a story that must be contextualized within China's broader push into South Asia and the Indian Ocean over the past decade—one with important implications for U.S. strategy and for economic and political freedom across the region.

Background

The Maldives is a 1,190-island Muslim-majority archipelago in the western Indian Ocean. The country's 26 atolls and thousand-plus islands comprise only 180 square miles of land, housing a population of roughly 400,000. However, the Maldives draws substantial geopolitical value and interest from its location: It sits astride the Seven Degree Channel and a superhighway of east-west maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. With its islands stretching 500 miles north to south and 80 miles east to west, the Maldives enjoys a huge exclusive economic zone (EEZ) encompassing over 325,000 square miles of prime Indian Ocean real estate.

For three decades the Maldives was ruled by an autocrat, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who "won" six consecutive rigged elections with over 95 percent of the vote after assuming power in 1978. In 2007, a referendum reformed the country's political system, heralding its first transition to genuine democratic elections the following year.

The Maldives has enjoyed diplomatic relations with China since 1972, but, not least by virtue of its proximity, India has long enjoyed a dominant position in the country. When Gayoom confronted a coup attempt in

MAP 1

The Maldives Exclusive Economic Zone

— Major Shipping Lane



NOTE: Shipping routes and exclusive economic zones are approximate.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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1988—the third in less than a decade—he made a desperate appeal to Delhi for aid. Within 12 hours, 1,600 Indian paratroopers swept into the capital of Male and restored Gayoom to power.¹

Nevertheless, by the late 1990s Indian news reports began speculating that China intended to lease land on the island of Marao to construct a maritime monitoring hub or a submarine base. The reports were never substantiated and were repeatedly disavowed by Male. But diplomatic and security engagement with Beijing began increasing by the turn of the century, with visits to Male by the PLA's general chief of staff in 1999 and Premier Zhu Rongji in 2001. The following year Beijing hosted the Maldives State Minister of Defense and National Security.²

Despite these flirtations, economic and diplomatic interactions remained quite limited. China–Maldives trade was a paltry \$2.98 million in 2001, with China's cumulative investments in the country totaling roughly \$40 million.³ By contrast, Gayoom maintained a close economic and defense relationship with India, including through regular joint military exercises, training programs, and military-education exchanges.

A New Democracy Is Born

When the Maldives held its first truly democratic elections in 2008, Gayoom was bested by 41-year-old opposition candidate Mohammed Nasheed by a margin of 54.25 percent to 45.75 percent. Nasheed had spent years imprisoned as a political activist and opponent of the Gayoom regime, winning a short-lived seat in parliament in 1999.

Nasheed and his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) made no secret of their desire to maintain a strong relationship with India. During a visit to Delhi in 2009, Nasheed agreed to have India deploy 26 coastal radars to monitor the Maldives' territorial waters and have the Indian coast guard and navy help patrol the Maldives' territorial waters.

The Nasheed government also sought to maintain working ties with China. It opened the Maldives' first embassy in Beijing in May 2009, and President Nasheed made a state visit to China in 2010 during a trip to the Shanghai World Expo.⁴ He even pursued some high-profile infrastructure deals with Beijing, including a Chinese-financed \$74 million housing complex on Hulhumale, "the largest civilian housing project in the history of the country and the first commercial project undertaken by the Chinese in the Maldives."⁵

Nevertheless, the government's tilt toward India was overt, and President Nasheed had no qualms about defying Beijing at the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009.⁶ During the conference, Nasheed "would take a fair degree of pleasure in tweaking the Chinese as he stood up for binding targets against pressure from Beijing to get in line," writes scholar Andrew Small. "He would later describe then-Chinese premier Wen Jiabao as almost shaking with anger during their meeting."⁷

In 2010 the Nasheed government signed an over \$300 million contract with GMR, an Indian-led consortium, to upgrade and operate the main airport in Male on a 25-year lease. At a time the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka was expanding engagement with Beijing, Nasheed insisted the Maldives had no interest in playing the "China card." He explained:

Maintaining balance in the Indian Ocean is very important. There is not enough room in the Indian Ocean for other non-traditional friends. We are not receptive to any installation, military or otherwise, in the Indian Ocean, especially from un-traditional friends. The Indian Ocean is the Indian Ocean.... It's far easier to deal with India than with China.⁸

Amid Political Turmoil, China Enters the Game

While Nasheed won international accolades for his economic reform programs, disaffected business interests and allies of former president Gayoom opposed the government at every turn, organizing popular protests against the Nasheed government in 2011. In January 2012, President Nasheed credibly accused the chief justice of the Maldives Criminal Court of protecting former Gayoom allies from charges of corruption and human rights abuses and ordered the judge arrested.

The opposition coalesced to oust Nasheed and, amid growing protests and defections from the police and security services, Nasheed resigned during a tense standoff in the capital in February 2012. Nasheed's vice president, Mohamed Waheed, was named president.

Just as the young democracy was struggling with its first political crisis, China began taking a greater interest in the Maldives. In mid-2011, at the outset of the political turmoil, Male was visited by Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Wu Bangguo, the highest-ranking Chinese leader to visit the country since Premier Zhu a decade earlier. In November 2011, China opened its first embassy in the Maldives as anti-Nasheed protests were escalating.

After Nasheed was deposed, in September 2012 President Waheed flew to Xinjiang to meet Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. There, Waheed secured a pledge of \$500 million in Chinese assistance and a \$150 million loan from China's Export-Import bank to fund a new housing complex. A month later, PBSC member Li Changchun was welcomed in Male.

In November 2012, the Waheed government abruptly canceled the country's contract with India's GMR to upgrade the capital airport, sparking concerns in Delhi about the government's pro-China tilt. (A Singaporean arbitration tribunal later ruled Waheed's decision to "re-nationalize" the airport was unlawful.) One month later, Waheed dispatched the Maldives defense minister to Beijing with the two sides "willing to cement relations between the two countries and their militaries."⁹

In February 2013, the Waheed government ordered the arrest of former president Nasheed for the detention of a criminal court judge while he was president. Nasheed sought refuge in the Indian High Commission for nearly two weeks but was promptly arrested when he departed the facility. Despite his imprisonment—and no shortage of political chicanery by the Waheed administration—when presidential elections were held later that year, Nasheed nearly doubled his vote count from 2008. He won 46 percent of the tally, falling just short of the 50 percent needed to prevent a runoff.

By contrast, Waheed received just 5 percent. During the second round of voting, opposition parties united behind Gayoom's half-brother, Abdulla Yameen, who assumed the presidency in November 2013 despite garnering just 25 percent in the first round.¹⁰

The Yameen Government Warms to China

Three months after his inauguration, President Yameen paid a three-day visit to India, where he explained that ties with China were “very close” but ties with India were “far more precious” and “will precede any other relationship.”¹¹ Nevertheless, Yameen's election heralded a further acceleration of China–Maldives ties.

President Yameen traveled to Beijing in September 2014, securing a \$16 million grant. A month later he hosted President Xi Jinping in Male, calling China one of the Maldives' “closest friends, most trusted allies, and the most dependable development partners.” Most important for Beijing, Xi secured a pledge from Yameen to join and support and join China's BRI.

In turn, Xi pledged \$100 million in grants and military assistance and inked a deal to construct a \$210 million “Friendship Bridge” connecting the capital Male to the nearby island of Hulhule, which houses the capital's international airport.¹² Yameen also awarded a contract to a Chinese company to upgrade the airport from which the Indian consortium was evicted in 2012.¹³ Xi and Yameen applauded the fact that China now accounted for more than a third of inbound tourists to the Maldives, the lifeline of its economy. Annual Chinese tourists, numbering 100,000 in 2010, more than tripled to 363,000 in 2014.¹⁴

By 2014, Chinese investments in the Maldives included a Maldives Ministry of Foreign Affairs building, a national museum, housing projects, and various investments in renewable energy, tourism, and telecommunications.¹⁵ In his Republic Day speech later that year, Yameen said his “government's thinking is changing toward the East,” lauding how conducting business with China did not involve the same challenges as “Western colonial powers.”¹⁶

India Gets Uneasy

In early 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was preparing for a major Indian Ocean tour of Sri Lanka, the Seychelles, the Maldives, and Mauritius. That February, former President Nasheed, who had been cleared on “abuse of power” charges from 2013, was rearrested

and re-charged under new anti-terrorism laws. One day after telling the *Times of India* the Yameen government was “blindly allowing Chinese investments at excessive interest rates,” the former president was literally dragged to court.¹⁷

The Indian government demanded the release of Nasheed, and the Indian press erupted in protest, calling on Prime Minister Modi to cancel the visit to Male and warning that the Yameen government had “shown its cards” and was “being encouraged by China.”¹⁸ When Yameen refused to budge, Modi took Male off the agenda of his regional tour. In a closed-door hearing weeks later, Nasheed was charged with a 13-year prison sentence, preventing him from contesting presidential elections. (Nasheed was permitted to travel to Britain for surgery in January 2016, where he was granted political asylum.¹⁹)

In June 2015, three months after Modi’s canceled trip, President Yameen declared that Sino–Maldives relations were at an “all-time high.” The following month he took a controversial decision to amend the Maldives’ constitution, overturning a prohibition on land ownership by foreigners. In only the second amendment to the 2008 constitution, the new text permit foreigners to purchase land in the Maldives if they invested more than \$1 billion in the project and reclaimed land accounted for at least 70 percent of the project area. Critics insisted that China was the only country with the financial prowess and land reclamation experience to benefit from the amendment.²⁰

In a country where the legislative process “includes three main stages and usually takes weeks or months,”²¹ the bill became law 48 hours after being submitted to parliament. One hour after clearing a committee, the bill was passed at 1:00 a.m. Opposition lawmakers in Male warned of a “possible Chinese military expansion.”

Yameen sought to keep ties with India on a stable footing. In August 2015, Yameen drafted a letter reassuring India that the Maldives would remain a “demilitarized zone,” and in October he reiterated that Male would follow an “India First” policy. In February 2016, India’s newest aircraft carrier, the *Vikramaditya*, visited the Maldives on her first overseas voyage.²²

The following August, however, three Chinese navy warships made a goodwill visit to Male.²³ The Indian press claimed that Yameen had “disregarded India’s request to deny permission to [the] Chinese warships—as retaliation, India invited Mohamed Nasheed to Delhi, his first visit there since his exile.”²⁴

When President Yameen traveled to Beijing in December 2017, he inked a free trade agreement and signed a protocol to have China establish a Joint

Ocean Observation Station in Makunudhoo.²⁵ Despite it being the Maldives' first free trade agreement, MDP parliamentarians claimed that the document was vetted in a closed-door committee session in just 10 minutes. Opposition members of parliament (MPs) "were not given access to the document in order to review it before passing. The government allowed for less than an hour for the entire parliamentary process to approve a 1,000-plus page document."²⁶

According to one account, lawmakers "were suddenly informed that an 'emergency' session would take place at 2:30 p.m.... With the opposition not in the chambers, the motion to support the agreement was passed unanimously by the 30 [of 85] MPs present."²⁷ Lawmakers protested that the Maldives constitution requires the consent of at least 43 MPs to pass legislation. From London, former President Nasheed claimed that the agreement would "deepen the debt trap to China—already more than 70% of our foreign debt is owed to Beijing, which gives Beijing huge leverage over us, undermining Maldivian sovereignty and independence."²⁸

A New Political Crisis and a New Election

In February 2018, the Maldives supreme court ruled that the conviction of former President Nasheed on anti-terrorism charges was unconstitutional and ordered the release of nine imprisoned MPs, potentially restoring a parliamentary majority to the opposition. The Yameen government refused to comply, declaring a state of emergency and ordering the arrest of several judges and former President Gayoom, Yameen's now-estranged half-brother.

India responded icily. Its Ministry of External Affairs was "deeply dismayed" and hoped "that Maldives quickly returns to the path of democracy and the rule of law."²⁹ China's foreign ministry, by contrast, insisted: "what happens now in the Maldives falls within that country's internal affairs."³⁰

China's nationalist *Global Times* then began taking unusually sharp jabs at the Indian government: "It is widely believed that the political crisis in Maldives has been precipitated by India's interference in its neighbor's internal affairs.... India deems South Asia as its sphere of influence and becomes concerned when neighboring countries draw closer to other states."³¹ In February the *Global Times* escalated its rhetoric: "China should take necessary measures to stop India if New Delhi moves to intervene militarily.... If India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi. India should not underestimate China's opposition to unilateral military intervention."³²

As the crisis was unfolding, news reports suggested that 11 Chinese warships had sailed into the eastern Indian Ocean potentially bound for the Maldives, including a fleet of destroyers.³³ Some reports claimed that the Indian navy confronted the Chinese flotilla. The story, however, was soon debunked. Indian military officials explained that a pair of Chinese warships had indeed passed into the Indian Ocean via the Sunda Strait but quickly returned to the South China Sea via the Lombok Strait in what may have been a routine exercise.³⁴

The crisis was eventually resolved when the Maldivian court overturned its order under pressure from the Yameen government. However, relations with Delhi remained frosty throughout 2018. That year, Male decided not to renew a lease for two advanced light helicopters from India and did not participate in India's MILAN naval exercises or the India Defense Expo.³⁵

When Maldivians voted in presidential elections in September 2018, President Yameen was expected to win re-election. Instead, he was upset by MDP candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, an ally of former President Nasheed promising an "India first" foreign policy. Solih earned just under 135,000 votes, compared to Yameen's 96,000.

While Yameen initially conceded defeat, speculation began to build that he might seek to subvert the democratic process and refuse to cede power to Solih. The Trump Administration threatened the Yameen government with sanctions if it engaged in democratic backsliding and called for the release of "falsely accused political prisoners."³⁶

After taking the Maldives off his regional tour in 2015, Prime Minister Modi agreed to attend the swearing-in ceremony in Male in November, seemingly to provide some protection against any democratic backsliding. The power transfer unfolded peacefully, and the new government soon sought to rebalance the Maldives foreign policy back toward India while scrutinizing the Yameen government's various agreements with China.

The Pendulum Swings as Solih Rebalances

Within days of Solih's inauguration, a report from Japan's *Nikkei Asian Review* suggested that India was "in talks with the Maldives, offering low-interest loans over several installments in exchange for stronger security ties, including the permanent deployment of Indian military personnel in the island nation."³⁷ The story further claimed that India was considering extending new loans to Male "but only if the island nation agrees to distance itself from Beijing."

President Solih chose Delhi as his first official trip abroad in December 2018, securing a lifeline from India via a pledge for a \$1.4 billion economic package. India also encouraged partners from the Gulf to provide Male economic assistance. Prime Minister Modi explained that he and President Solih had agreed to “not use our respective countries for any activity that may cause harm to the other.”³⁸

The Solih government wasted no time airing concerns about the financial arrangements President Yameen had entered with China. “As I take over the presidency the state’s financial situation is precarious,” Solih warned. “The state coffers have lost several billions of rufiyaa [the local currency] due to embezzlement and corruption conducted at different levels of the government.”³⁹ Without naming China directly, Solih lamented: “The treasury has endured a colossal blow owing to reckless mega development projects undertaken purely for political gain.”⁴⁰

Perhaps not coincidentally, the Maldives saw a sharp drop in Chinese tourists in late 2018, including a 13 percent decline in the fourth quarter and 7 percent decline for the year.⁴¹ They remained at the same relatively suppressed level in 2019.⁴²

“The previous government tried to move our country into the South China Sea. They forgot we are not a Chinese island,” a senior Maldivian official explained to this author in 2019. He repeated concerns the government was unable to get an accurate picture of China’s active land reclamation projects in the country⁴³ or the amount of debt owed to China.

“The different figures [President Solih] is getting from different departments, ministries, and state-owned enterprises, they don’t tally with what the Finance Ministry has,” admitted the new foreign minister in November 2018.⁴⁴ Official estimates put the Maldives debt to China at around \$1.4 billion, or 78 percent of its external debt.⁴⁵ Officials believed that the true figure might be closer to \$3 billion when accounting for sovereign guarantees to Chinese banks made by the Yameen administration. (The Maldives gross domestic product in 2018 was \$5.3 billion.)

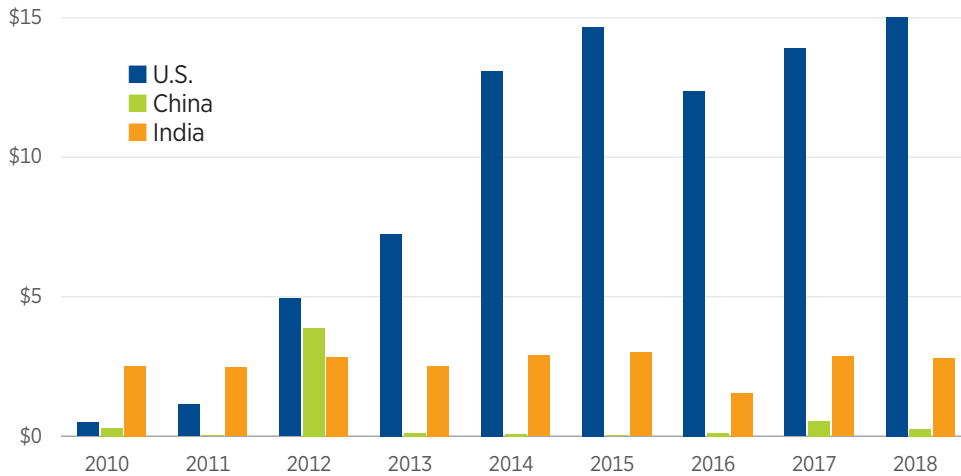
In January 2019 the new finance minister, Ibrahim Ameer, told the *Financial Times* the debt accrued to Beijing was the product of large-scale graft that inflated the value of contracts. “This was willful corruption.... That’s why the contract prices were too high. We do not have the fiscal health to carry on with these contracts. So it is in our interest to renegotiate.”⁴⁶ Ameer later complained that a Chinese firm was awarded a contract to build a hospital in Male at the cost of \$140 million despite a rival bid for \$54 million.⁴⁷

In February 2019, former president Yameen was arrested after the discovery of a suspicious \$1 million transfer to his bank account, “allegedly

CHART 1

Trade Partners for the Maldives: Exports

MALDIVES EXPORTS, IN MILLIONS OF U.S. DOLLARS



SOURCE: World Integrated Trade Solution, “Maldives Trade Statistics : Exports, Imports, Products, Tariffs, GDP and Related Development Indicator,” <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/MDV> (accessed June 16, 2020).

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linked to a deal to lease public islands for tourism development in the Maldives.”⁴⁸ He was convicted on corruption and embezzlement charges and sentenced to five years in prison that November.⁴⁹

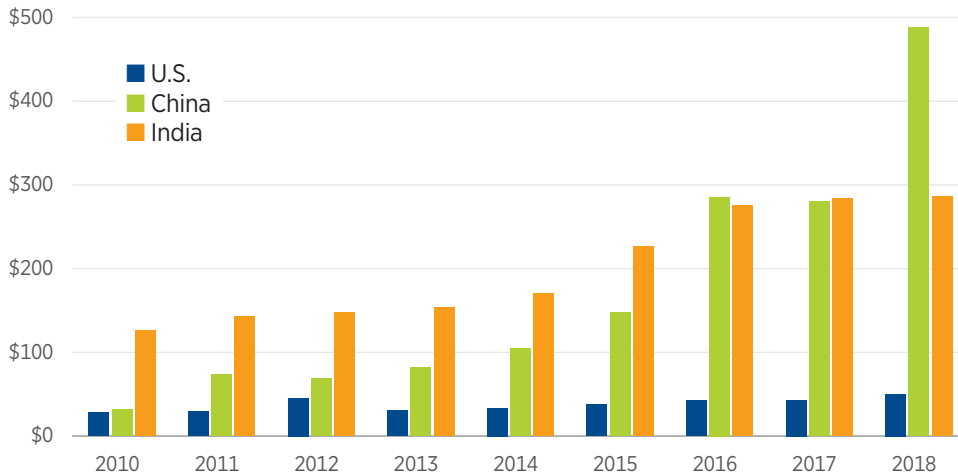
In April 2019, the MDP swept parliamentary elections, winning 65 of 87 seats. Afterward, Nasheed said the government would be “rethinking” the free trade agreement with China that had been “rushed through parliament in a matter of hours, against procedures.”⁵⁰ In the interim, trade with China had grown increasingly imbalanced. According to Bloomberg, “More than 99 percent of the \$258 million trade between the countries [in 2017] consisted of Chinese exports to the Maldives.”⁵¹

In June 2019, Prime Minister Modi made the Maldives his first foreign destination after winning a second term. In Male he signed agreements advancing plans for a coastal surveillance radar system and a military training center for the Maldivian military.⁵² When China organized a campaign in October 2019 to obtain signatures for a letter supporting its repressive policies in Xinjiang, it found success in most South Asian capitals. India and the Maldives were the two exceptions.⁵³ The Solih government also scrapped plans to build a joint ocean observation station with China.⁵⁴

CHART 2

Trade Partners for the Maldives: Imports

MALDIVES IMPORTS, IN MILLIONS OF U.S. DOLLARS



SOURCE: World Integrated Trade Solution, “Maldives Trade Statistics : Exports, Imports, Products, Tariffs, GDP and Related Development Indicator,” <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/MDV> (accessed June 16, 2020).

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Despite its estrangement from Beijing, the Solih government remains highly dependent on China to sustain its tourism industry, which likely faces devastating consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism accounts for 60 percent of the Maldives’ foreign exchange earnings, and despite a notable drop after the election of President Solih, China remains the single largest source of tourists to the Maldives, accounting for 300,000 or 18 percent of the record 1.7 million tourists in 2019.⁵⁵ In March 2020, the Maldives received a shipment of medical aid from China’s Yunnan province to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁶

The United States Warms to the Solih Government

Like India, the United States welcomed the 2018 election that saw power peacefully transferred to President Solih, whom the Trump Administration described as “a reform-oriented leader committed to rebuilding the country’s democratic institutions.”⁵⁷ In 2019, the State Department declared:

The U.S. government applauds Maldives’ commitment to advance justice sector reform, good governance, rule of law, transparent public financial management,

anti-corruption, growth of civil society, responsible infrastructure development, and education. We welcome the opportunity to deepen engagement with Maldives in support of common priorities and a shared vision for the Indian Ocean region.⁵⁸

In February 2019, Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid visited Washington, where Secretary of State Mike Pompeo committed \$10 million in economic support funds to Male to promote financial management, rule of law, and civil society building. The Trump Administration also announced a new Maldives-focused program within the Treasury Department to provide Male “assistance on debt strategy and domestic debt management” and a new partnership between USAID and the Maldives Finance Ministry to “promote public financial management best practices.” Some of the assistance was provided via the new Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network, which “catalyzes private sector investment by optimizing U.S. development finance and assistance tools, including project preparation services and commercial advocacy.”⁵⁹

These programs were added to ongoing initiatives with the Maldives at the State Department that include the promotion of civil society and women’s economic empowerment, the preservation of marine ecosystems, a Department of Justice program to provide legal advisor and criminal justice support, and a Department of Treasury assistance program to help combat financial crimes.

In July 2019 the State Department applauded that the Maldives “has extended strong support to U.S. efforts to combat terrorism and terrorist financing” and announced \$7 million in foreign military financing under the Bay of Bengal Initiative.⁶⁰ The funds would support maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and military professionalization. In its November 2019 strategy document on the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” the Trump Administration claimed to have provided the Maldives “\$23 million in foreign assistance to encourage the country’s anti-corruption, rule of law, and counterterrorism agenda.”⁶¹

Finally, in September 2020, Maldivian defense minister Mariya Didi signed a new “Framework for a Defense and Security Relationship” with the U.S. The document “sets forth both countries’ intent to deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean.”⁶² The two sides also agreed to begin holding a new Defense and Security Dialogue.

The Hindu reported that the Indian government had been shown a copy of the document and “welcomed” the agreement. This marked a break from

the past, when “New Delhi had objected to both the U.S. and China extending their strategic footprint in this part of the Indian Ocean.”⁶³ India, it adds, had objected to the Maldives signing a proposed status of forces agreement with the U.S. in 2013, which helped to scuttle the deal at the time.

Recommendations

What happens in the Maldives is of interest to the United States, not least because the country straddles the superhighway of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean with an EEZ larger than Pakistan. In recent years, the country has grappled with political instability and financial mismanagement amid its first transition to democracy. Geopolitically, it has become a new battleground in an escalating struggle for access and influence between China and India in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

In order to advance its interests in the region and promote democracy, stability, and prosperity in the Maldives, the U.S. government should:

- **Coordinate its Maldives policy with India.** While India has not always been a saint in the Maldives, since 2008 it has largely supported the country’s transition to democracy and now enjoys relatively strong ties with the ruling MDP. On balance it has been far more aligned with U.S. interests in the Maldives than has China.

Once quite skeptical of America’s presence in the region, Indian cooperation with the U.S. in South Asia and the Indian Ocean has been improving for many years, arguably reaching new heights during the Trump and Modi administrations. Indian and U.S. officials have openly praised the enhanced level of communication and coordination at several key junctures in recent years, including during bouts of political instability in the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

India and the United States both have good reason to see the Maldives remain independent, financially and politically stable, and democratic. The two should leverage their respective strengths in regional capitals and pursue diplomatic coordination, particularly during times of crisis. Working-level officials at the State Department, Pentagon, and regional embassy staff should continue close collaboration with their Indian counterparts to enhance Maldivian democratic resilience and capacity building and improve transparency and accountability.

- **Create and appoint a dedicated U.S. ambassador to the Maldives.**

Currently, the U.S. ambassador to the Maldives carries a dual assignment as U.S. ambassador to Sri Lanka as well. The embassy staff is based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. There is no U.S. embassy or embassy staff in the Maldives, although there is American Center in Male. There is also no Maldivian embassy in Washington—the Maldives permanent representative to the United Nations in New York serves as its senior diplomat in the United States. The U.S. government should strongly consider opening an embassy in the Maldives (China opened its first embassy there in 2011), appointing a dedicated U.S. ambassador to the Maldives, and welcoming Male to open an embassy in Washington, DC.

- **Offer the Maldives alternatives via the Blue Dot Network (BDN).**

At a time when China's BRI has attracted growing global scrutiny, Australia, Japan, and the United States have unveiled the BDN initiative, which is designed to promote "high-quality trusted standards for global infrastructure development." According to the State Department's webpage on the initiative, the BDN will:

- "[B]ring together governments, the private sector, and civil society under shared standards for global infrastructure development,"
- "[C]ertify infrastructure projects that demonstrate and uphold global infrastructure principles," and
- "[S]erve as a globally recognized symbol of market-driven, transparent and financially sustainable development projects."

While the BDN is still in its formative stages, once the network is operational it should target the Maldives as a priority country for cooperation, guiding the Maldives toward high-quality, transparent, sustainable infrastructure options.

- **Increase military, technical, and civil-society-building assistance to the Maldives.** Officials in the Solih government admit that U.S. experts have been assisting with their attempts to audit Chinese investments and loans agreed to by the Yameen government. The United States should consider elevating its efforts further, including through increased funding, to provide the Maldives with legal contract expertise and financial technical assistance.

The U.S. should also expand assistance to the Maldives through the Department of Defense's Bay of Bengal Initiative, through which it has already distributed \$7 million in Foreign Military Financing to Male. In 2019, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka became eligible for funding under the Pentagon's Maritime Security Initiative. The Maldives should be added to the list of eligible countries.

The Maldives is still a young democracy, and it is in the U.S. interest that Male does not slide back into authoritarianism. That will require an ongoing U.S. commitment to political, judicial, and civil society aid and reforms. To that end, it was encouraging to see that in April 2020, the U.S. State Department announced it was looking to award a \$500,000 grant in order to "reinforce the capacity of Maldives civil society groups to work together with the government to promote freedom of assembly and association, increase citizen engagement with local elected leaders, and address popular areas of mutual concern."⁶⁴

- **Focus on priorities for the Maldives.** The Maldives has historically been a blind spot for the United States. That has begun to change for the better during the Trump Administration commensurate with China's rising profile. But Washington should recognize that while Male desires greater engagement with the United States, it does not want to be seen as a cog in grander geopolitical rivalry between superpowers. If the United States wants to develop a stronger relationship with Male over the long term, it is important it broaden the spectrum of engagement to issues of strategic importance to Male.

One of those issues is climate change. The Maldives is among the most at-risk countries for climate change, which represents a potentially existential challenge for Male. The Maldives is the world's lowest-lying country, with an average elevation of less than five feet above sea level and a maximum elevation under eight feet. Various estimates suggest large portions of the Maldives could be submerged underwater by century's end. Another priority issue for Male is illegal unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU). The Maldives launched a National Action Plan in 2019 to combat IUU after estimating that poaching from foreign-flagged vessels harvest 10,000–15,000 tons of fish from the Maldives' EEZ annually.⁶⁵ The Maldives has also sporadically grappled

with piracy. Because of its massive EEZ, the Maldives has a compelling interest in developing its maritime domain awareness capabilities, an area of strength for the United States.

Conclusion

For the first time in modern history, China wields considerable influence in the Maldives. Early predictions that Beijing might leverage this influence into a military outpost in the Indian Ocean—a new link in a Chinese “String of Pearls”—have failed to materialize. Ten years later, China’s influence on the island is still eclipsed by India’s, particularly after elections in 2018 unseated President Abdullah Yameen.

The story of China’s engagement with the Maldives is nevertheless instructive and offers some cause for concern. It must be viewed in the context of China’s broader push into South Asia and the Indian Ocean over the past decade, where it has gained substantial ground in a region once viewed as firmly within India’s sphere of influence.

China’s growing reach into the region has been felt most acutely in the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The rest of South Asia was largely accounted for. At one end of the spectrum lies Bhutan, prevented by India from even having formal diplomatic relations with Beijing. At the other end is Pakistan, which can credibly claim to be China’s closest ally. Bangladesh has also enjoyed a fairly robust relationship with China, including in the defense arena. But it has kept Beijing at arms length strategically while pursuing stronger ties with India, particularly since the Awami league returned to power in 2009.

By contrast, in the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka China found three democracies in periods of turbulent political transitions or civil conflicts. Each carried some historical resentment toward India and a desire not only for Chinese capital and investments but its balancing presence.

To be sure, China has rational commercial and strategic reasons to secure greater access and influence in the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately, everywhere it has gone, China’s footprint has reflected the darker sides of the Chinese Communist Party. Some of its large-scale investments have, at best, been commercially questionable and strategically suspicious. As concerning, China has consistently reinforced authoritarian instincts. And its activities have frequently drawn charges of secrecy, corruption, espionage, and hidden agendas.

Nepal was once a bastion for Tibetans fleeing Communist Party rule in Tibet. China’s engagement with Kathmandu surged in the late 2000s as

the country was grappling with an armed Maoist rebellion and a series of constitutional crises. Since then, the pathway for Tibetan exiles has been virtually shut. China's security and intelligence services are believed to be operating with a free hand among the large Tibetan exile population there, which is facing growing restrictions from the Nepali government.

In Sri Lanka the regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa welcomed a major opening to China during the country's bloody battle with the separatist Tamil Tigers at a time India and the West shunned his government over human rights abuses. China extended Sri Lanka billions of dollars in loans for questionable infrastructure projects, such as the Hambantota port. When Sri Lanka was unable to service its debts, Chinese entities assumed control of the port. Chinese firms were also charged with illegally funneling money to pro-China politicians and inserting sovereignty-violating provisions in infrastructure deals negotiated with Colombo in secret.⁶⁶

China's opening to the Maldives came at a time the young democracy was grappling with its first major political crisis. Ties soared after a soft coup ousted the country's first democratically elected president. When President Yameen imposed a state of emergency in 2018 following an unfavorable court ruling, India and the United States urged Male to respect democracy. China insisted it was all part of the Maldives' internal affairs.

The Yameen government saw an influx of Chinese loans and investments. Some produced valuable infrastructure projects. However, two of the bigger, more controversial agreements with China were pushed through parliament via questionable, potentially unconstitutional means, lacking transparency and drawing charges of corruption. Even today, Maldivian officials complain that they cannot get an accurate accounting of how much debt is owed to China.

In each case China's push into the region has posed new challenges to economic and political freedom—and in each case has sharpened the rivalry with India. That was perhaps inevitable as China's growing sphere of activities began to encompass India's immediate neighborhood. But in all three countries, Beijing has frequently, seemingly intentionally, put itself at odds with Delhi, with the two often backing opposing parties and candidates while indirectly sniping at each other through the media. It has contributed to a sense of strategic encirclement in Delhi and added a new layer of friction atop the two countries' legacy disputes over their unsettled border, Tibet, and China's patronage toward Pakistan.

Thus far, the results of China's regional offensive have been mixed. In each case heightened engagement with Beijing has drawn domestic and international scrutiny and criticism. In each instance there has been a

case of “buyer’s remorse” and, usually following an election, an attempt to renegotiate terms with China. In the Maldives, the Yameen government’s embrace of Beijing precipitated a political backlash and, eventually, a democratic course correction that favored pro-Western and pro-democracy forces.

Nevertheless, China can credibly claim to have built a framework for sustained political and economic influence in the region—something it did not enjoy a decade ago. It has also created new policy dilemmas for pro-democracy forces in the region and new alternatives for authoritarian-minded leaders shunned by India and the United States. In short, the game has changed. To keep the balance tipped in favor of political and economic freedom, the United States and its regional partners will have to adapt.

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