



Dynamics Of Diplomacy: Unraveling The Tapestry Of India-Maldives Relations Across Time

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Abstract: The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the complex relationship between India and the Maldives by looking at both historical and modern aspects. The study explores the cultural, economic and geopolitical elements that have influenced the relationship between these two countries. The goal of the paper is to offer a thorough understanding of the historical and contemporary relations between India and the Maldives by examining the development of diplomatic contacts and the influence of regional dynamics. The paper examines what impact the diplomatic row since Mohamed Muizzu's coming to power in Maldives can have. The economic implications of campaigns like 'India-out' and '#boycottMaldives' can have. The global reaction to the ongoing spat and its impact on the Indian Ocean Region is also examined. The strategic importance of the archipelagos of Maldives in the region and why a stable Maldives is a necessity for the region is also discussed.

Index Terms - India-out, #boycottMaldives, Maldives, Lakshadweep, Muizzu, India-Maldives

1. Introduction

Geopolitically, the Maldives hold a strategic position in the Indian Ocean, which affects India's regional power and security concerns. Historical and cultural linkages form the basis of interpersonal relationships and cultural diplomacy. Their interactions shed light on alliances, disputes and emerging trends from a diplomatic perspective. The relationship's significance is amplified by its impact on global relationships and South Asian dynamics. India has stepped up efforts to strengthen its maritime security ties with the Maldives as India views itself as a 'security provider' in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) against piracy and natural disasters and sees the entire region as its strategic backyard. Naturally, not everyone has this opinion. This is especially contested by the Chinese, who frequently assert that "*the Indian Ocean is not India's backyard*".¹

Since Mohamed Muizzu became the President of Maldives. The relationship between India and Maldives has not been on good terms. Muizzu propagated the idea of "India Out" throughout his election campaign. Since becoming president, Muizzu has taken steps which have questioned his intentions of keeping the Indian-Maldivian relations cordial. He has ordered a complete withdrawal of the Indian forces from the island nation. Disregarding the very fact that the Indian personnel are stationed on the island to provide aid and assistance through non-offensive aircraft Dhruv and Dornier. He has been following a 'pro-China' policy. The tight ties between India and the Maldives, however, could be threatened by the expanding Sino-Maldives ties, which are motivated by China's strategic goals.² A new strategic partnership between the Indo-Maldives has emerged, inspired by the Sino-Indian competition, further complicating the equilibrium of the Indo-Maldives strategic dynamic.³

Since the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Indian archipelagos of Lakshadweep, a diplomatic row has started. The unprovoked derogatory comments of Maldivian ministers on Indian PM and citizens have started the '#boycottMaldives' trend in India. The alarming concern is that even after such an incident no direct statement by the Maldivian President has come out. Crisis management and conflict resolution are essential for maintaining stability in the region.

2. Historical Overview

As early as the 2nd century BCE, historical accounts indicate that Indian sailors and traders participated in maritime trade with the Maldives. The Maldives has a long history of cultural interchange, as evidenced by its linguistic and cultural links to India, particularly Sanskrit and Dhivehi.⁴ The Maldives and British India had diplomatic ties during the British colonial era. Diplomatic relations were established between India and the Maldives upon their independence in 1947. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 1954 visit to the Maldives, which laid the groundwork for post-colonial collaboration, is one of the notable early contacts.

The 1981 Friendship Treaty reinforced diplomatic ties between India and the Maldives. Mutual aid and cooperation were stressed in the treaty, particularly concerning defense issues. This pact continues to be a historic accord that has influenced the development of bilateral relations.⁵ In the past, the Indian Navy has been essential in helping the Maldives recover from natural calamities. Operation Cactus, in which the Indian military intervened to effectively foil a coup attempt in the Maldives in 1988, is one notable example. The security dynamics and regional cooperation between the two countries are emphasized by this event.⁶

India and the Maldives have close cultural links that stem from their common religious and linguistic heritage. Indian commerce and colonists have had a long-lasting influence on Maldivian culture. Over time, cultural events and educational exchanges have strengthened interpersonal ties even more.⁷ In the past, the Maldives has played a significant role in marine trade routes that link Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Commodities including coconuts, spices, and textiles were traded in the past. The basis for current trade connections between India and the Maldives was established by their historical economic interdependence.

3. Geopolitical Considerations

3.1 Strategic Importance of the Maldives

As a crossroads for maritime travel, migration, trade and conflict, the Maldives play a crucial geopolitical role in the Indian Ocean region. Due to its historical positioning, the nation has become an important participant in the global economy.⁸ Strategic geography defines the geo-strategic importance of Maldives far beyond its physical size. Despite its diminutive size, the Maldives remains one of the most widely distributed countries on the planet. With a land area of just 300 square kilometers and a population of around 480,000, it is the smallest nation in Asia. Nevertheless, the Maldives spans an impressive 960-kilometer-long submarine ridge that extends from north to south, forming a formidable barrier in the heart of the Indian Ocean.

The two only safe passages for ships traversing the northern and southern parts of this island chain are of utmost significance. It is imperative to note that ships can only safely pass through these passages, as they are the sole means to ensure safe traversal. The two only safe passages for ships traversing the northern and southern parts of this island chain are of utmost significance. It is imperative to note that ships can only safely pass through these passages, as they are the sole means to ensure safe traversal. These sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) are critical for maritime trade between the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia. While the Indian Ocean is considered the key highway for global trade and energy flow, Maldives virtually stands as a toll gate.

The Indian Ocean has seen a surge in maritime economic activity, leading to intensified geopolitical competition. Due to its strategic maritime geography, the Maldives plays a crucial role in this competition. China's strategic interests and logistical limitations in the Indian Ocean have led to an increased presence in the region. The Maldives' proximity to regional shipping routes makes it an important toehold. However, concerns remain about China's potential strategic presence in the archipelago.

India's developmental priority is to promote a positive maritime environment in the Indian Ocean, aiming to create a peaceful and stable area. SLOCs near the Maldives have strategic significance for global maritime trade, as nearly 50% of India's external trade and 80% of its energy imports transit these westward SLOCs in the Arabian Sea. Despite recent regime instability in the Maldives, the democratic process in the Maldives has withstood this challenge. India remains a committed development partner for a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Maldives, as demonstrated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to the Maldives at the beginning of his second term.

3.2 Security Cooperation

The early 1980s saw a rise in the significance of India and the Maldives' security cooperation. When a coup attempt occurred in the Maldives in 1988, India reacted quickly with Operation Cactus, which was effective in stopping the coup and preserving the Maldivian government. This intervention laid the groundwork for future cooperation between the two countries and demonstrated their cooperative security efforts.⁹ But starting in the middle of the 2000s, ties between China and the Maldives grew significantly, endangering the strategic partnership between the two countries. However, the growing rivalry between China and India has also had a significant impact on the strategic relations between the two countries. Initially, India was the de facto port of first call; however, this changed in 2005 when an 'India First' policy was articulated. This policy then underwent substantiations, particularly in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative and has been evolving toward an 'India-dominated' one since late 2018.¹⁰

India has been actively involved in a range of operations aimed at assisting people in need. These include search and rescue missions, hydrographic mapping to support maritime navigation and safety, and initiatives to enhance the country's maritime domain awareness. In addition, India has been providing much-needed support in the form of humanitarian aid and disaster response to help those affected by unforeseen events and natural calamities. The Maldives and India's security cooperation has been largely shaped by shared security concerns, such as piracy, maritime security, and regional stability. To address these concerns, procedures for exchanging information, including joint military exercises and regular discussions, have been established. The Maldives National Defense Force and the Indian Army are participating in the 12th edition of the joint military exercise 'Ex Ekuverin', which took place in Chaubatia, Uttarakhand, from June 11 to 24, 2023.¹¹

For over a decade, India has supported the Maldives militarily. To strengthen defense partnerships, a comprehensive Action Plan for Defense was also signed in April 2016.¹² Indian military personnel assist with rescue efforts and provide combat and reconnaissance training to Maldivian troops. However, India has been ordered by Mohamed Muizzu, the president of the Maldives, to remove its military forces by March 15, 2024.¹³ Following his well-publicized trip to China, the President has made this request amid a low-key diplomatic spat with India. India's strategic objectives in the area may be impacted by the removal of Indian military personnel from the Maldives.

3.3 Regional Alliances and Alignments

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) includes both the Maldives and India as members. Their participation in SAARC is indicative of their dedication to regional collaboration and tackling common issues. Both countries actively engage in SAARC projects addressing everything from environmental issues to economic development. The relationship between India and the Maldives is set in the larger framework of Indian Ocean regional dynamics. As members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, both countries participate in talks and activities that promote maritime security, economic cooperation, and stability in the region. India and the Maldives participate in several multilateral organizations, such as the Commonwealth and the United Nations. Their cooperation efforts in these forums underscore the significance of a stable and cooperative regional environment, in line with larger regional and global aspirations.

The changing dynamics of the region also include the increasing impact of other entities, most notably China. Concerns about preserving the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region are shared by both India and the Maldives. To maintain regional stability while navigating the shifting geopolitical landscape, cooperative projects and diplomatic discussions are now in progress.¹⁴

4. Economic Partnerships

4.1 Investment and Development Projects

India holds a dominant position in the Maldives, with connections spanning almost all domains. It is widely recognized that India plays an important role in the Maldives and is considered a net security provider in the region. Since February 1974, the State Bank of India has been a key player in the economic growth of the Maldives by offering credit support for the development of island resorts, the export of marine products and commercial ventures. A trade agreement was established between India and the Maldives in 1981, which permits the exportation of essential goods. The agreement has played a pivotal role in strengthening the ties between the two nations. India extended the three-year agreement on quotas for the shipment of nine basic commodities to the Maldives without limitations in July 2021. To promote the Maldives' socioeconomic development programs, the Indian government announced a US\$ 1.4 billion financial package that included concessional Line of Credit (\$800 million), currency swapping (\$400 million), purchasing treasury bills (\$150 million), and budgetary help (\$50 million) during the first formal state visit by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldives to India in December 2018.¹⁵ On March 18, 2019, the Ministry of Finance, GoM, and EXIM Bank of India inked a US\$ 800 million Credit Line Agreement. In 2021, India and the Maldives' bilateral commerce exceeded \$300 million for the first time, coming in at a whopping \$323.29 million. Trade increased by more than 31% in comparison to the prior year. With over 27,000, Indians make up the second-largest expat population in the Maldives. Indian nationals make up a sizable portion of the medical staff in the Maldives, including nurses, doctors, and educators.¹⁶

4.2 Tourism Economy

The Maldivian economy is heavily dependent on its tourism sector, which is the major source of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue and directly accounts for about 75% of the GDP of Maldives. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimates that in 2022, the travel industry accounted for almost 70% of jobs in the Maldives, contributing 58.3% of the country's overall GDP. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a decrease in tourism in the Maldives. China sent the most tourists to the island nation until 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. In 2023, India generated a \$380 million value of tourism to the Maldives.¹⁷ With over 6.1% (90,474) of the market share in 2018, India ranked as the fifth-largest source of tourists visiting the Maldives. Nonetheless, India secured the second position in 2019 with nearly twice as many arrivals as in 2018. With about 63,000 Indian tourists visiting the Maldives in 2020—the year of the pandemic—India accounted for the Maldives' biggest source market. With over 2.91 lakh arrivals and a 23% market share in 2021, India remained the largest market. As per the tourism ministry of the Maldives, as of December 13, 2023, 1.7 million tourists had reached the island nation, signifying a 12.6% rise from the 1.5 million arrivals documented in 2022.¹⁸

5. Contemporary Diplomacy

5.1 Recent Developments in Bilateral Relations

Muizzu took the oath of office as the Republic of the Maldives' ninth president on November 17, 2023. In a vote for president, the Maldivians choose Mohamed Muizzu, a "pro-China" leader, against Ibrahim Solih, the "India-friendly" incumbent. At the unveiling of his manifesto on August 20, 2023, Muizzu declared that his government would prioritize upholding the independence of the Maldives while also fostering close ties with other nations.¹⁹ He emphasized that his administration would not primarily support one country. Anti-Indian attitude did not suddenly emerge, it has been since 2013 when the Progressive Party (PPM)'s Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom was elected president. The PPM's five-year tenure saw a decline in relations between India and the Maldives and anti-India sentiment was evident.

Muizzu's mentor is Abdulla Yameen, the man who started the "India Out" campaign and Muizzu was the minister of the building during Yameen's presidency. The Islamist mob that invaded a football stadium in Male in 2022 to disrupt a public yoga session organized by the Indian High Commission and the Maldivian government was spearheaded by Abdulla Yameen's party.²⁰ Based on Yameen's 'India Out' philosophy, Muizzu launched his campaign, spreading worries that the Maldives is under the control of the Indian government and promising to free it from any purported Indian meddling.²¹ Muizzu breaking the old tradition, visited Turkey first after coming to power rather than India. Then he visited China to hold talks with President Xi Jinping.

Muizzu's allegation that Maldives' sovereignty is under attack from abroad is more of a political ploy than a genuine concern. There are just 77 Indian soldiers stationed in the Maldives, and those soldiers also fly two Dhruv helicopters and a Dornier aircraft that India has provided to aid reach people in need of medical attention on remote islands in the archipelago. According to Uz Mohamed Firzul, the undersecretary for public policy in the Maldives president's office, one of the two helicopters' operations was assigned to 24 Indian military men, while the other 26 were stationed to operate the other. In addition, 25 other Indian military personnel were operating a Dornier 228 aircraft.²²

5.2 Crisis and Conflict

There is now a diplomatic dispute between India and the Maldives over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Lakshadweep. The breathtaking photographs of Lakshadweep's natural beauty that Prime Minister Modi shared during his tour have inspired interest in the location all over the world. People are expressing a wish to visit this Union Territory from all over the world. While on his visit, Prime Minister Modi emphasized Lakshadweep's unrealized potential by calling it a region "full of many possibilities".²³ Nonetheless, three Maldivian politicians asserted that Prime Minister Modi's visit was an effort to promote Lakshadweep as a substitute travel destination for the Maldives. In response to a video encouraging tourism in Lakshadweep, an Indian UT in the Arabian Sea; Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid—all employees of the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information, and Arts—referred to Modi as a "clown," "terrorist," and "puppet of Israel" on social media platform X. Tensions arose between the two nations as a result of this view. The matter was brought up with the Maldives government by the Indian High Commission there. Actors from Bollywood and athletes among other Indian celebrities voiced their displeasure with the remarks made by the Maldivian government's officials.

The Maldives' Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged disparaging comments made on social media sites about foreign dignitaries and high-ranking officials. A statement from the Ministry stated that these are an individual's opinions and do not reflect those of the Maldivian government. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, the former president of the Maldives, denounced the use of "hateful language" against India. India has always been a close friend of the Maldives. "We must not allow such callous remarks to negatively impact the age-old friendship between our two countries," Solih wrote in a post on X.²⁴ President Mohamed Muizzu's administration, facing criticism and attempting to resolve a situation that was quickly becoming a diplomatic spat, suspended three ministers for disparaging PM Modi and the Indian people.

Social media in India became enraged by the remarks and calls for a boycott of the Maldives were made. Many Indians announced on social media that they were postponing their Maldives vacations in response to the commotion. The CEO of the Indian travel website EaseMyTrip declared that all reservations for flights to the nation had been halted. Indians are encouraging one another to visit Lakshadweep instead of the Maldives on social media as they share about their cancelled vacations there. Since Modi's visit, searches for Lakshadweep have increased by 3400%, according to MakeMyTrip, another Indian trip booking website.²⁵

Since the comments against Indian PM Modi, Indian tourists have fallen from first place to fifth place in the Maldives, according to official data issued by the Maldives Ministry of Tourism.²⁶ Social media reports claimed that Indians have cancelled over 8000 hotel reservations and over 2500 airline tickets to the Maldives.²⁷ Following divisive comments that damaged diplomatic ties between the two countries, President Mohammed Muizzu of the Maldives has been requested by Opposition Leader Qasim Ibrahim to issue a formal apology to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India. Many players have come forward amidst the diplomatic row. Israel is prepared to work with India to develop the islands of Lakshadweep, where it has proposed a desalination project. The Israeli embassy also emphasized the exquisite beauty of the UT.²⁸ Meanwhile, Pakistan has promised to support the Maldives' "development needs" despite tense relations with India.²⁹

6. Conclusion

The ties between India and Maldives have hit an all-time low since the latest developments. The intentions of the Maldivian President are still not to do damage control even after sharp advice from the opposition leaders and common Maldivians. Indian counterpart, PM Modi has avoided any direct comment on Muizzu or these recent events. Both countries are long-term friends and share a common strategic region. Major damage in the relationship will affect both parties. A strong and independent Maldives is essential for India's long-term

interests in the IOR and similarly, a cordial relationship with the regional giant is a necessity for Maldivian security and economic prosperity.

Falling into the 'debt trap diplomacy' of China is in no interest of Maldives. The economy of Maldives is already strained, especially after COVID-19, and New Delhi's 'no-string attached' economic assistance has been a significant relief for the Maldives. Both countries need to solve all the issues with proper communication. Strained relations are of no interest to regional security and cooperation. Domestic political agendas should not be satisfied in the interests of the mutual relationship between the two nations. President Muizzu should understand it and work for a prosperous region assisted with cooperation and mutual respect, keeping political agendas aside. Examining trade, investment and development initiatives is essential for both countries' economic cooperation and growth trajectory.

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