

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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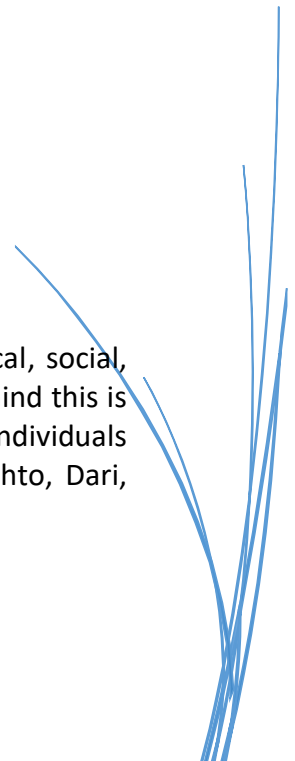
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## DETERIORATING INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS: THE CHINA FACTOR

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)

## DETERIORATING INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS: THE CHINA FACTOR

### Introduction

The Republic of Maldives, located in the Indian Ocean, consists of 1192 islands, of which 200 islands are inhabited by humans. Its population is 520,000 and 80% of its population lives in the capital Malé. Maldives is an Islamic country.<sup>1</sup> Islam is the official religion of the state and almost 98 percent of its population are Muslims.

In 2023, on the 30th of September, the presidential election was held in the Maldives. The former president Ibrahim Muhammad Saleh and Muhammad Muizhu were candidates for this election. During the election campaign, Ibrahim Muhammad Saleh was doing the politics of close relations with India and (India First) foreign policy. Mayiz promised the people during the election campaign that he will make Maldives independent in every sense and will remove it from the influence of India. Some media also called this election the election of China and India, that is, if Ibrahim wins, it will mean the victory of India, and if Mayiz wins, then it will mean the victory of China. In the end, Muhammad Moezo won the election and, following his promise, he traveled to China before India.

Also, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, visited the Indian island of Lakshadweep and gave the message to the people that the island of Lakshadweep is no less than the Maldives for tourism. In response to Modi's visit, some of the Maldivian cabinet ministers used insulting words against Modi due to which the relations between the two countries deteriorated further.

In this analysis, we will discuss the causes, negative results, and the competition between India and China in the regional political structure over the Maldives.

### CLOSE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIA AND MALDIVES

India and Maldives have religious, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic commonalities and this is an important means of their relationship. India was the first country that officially recognized Maldives after its establishment in 1965.<sup>2</sup>

Maldives in 1965, became a member of the United Nations in the same year and announced his foreign policy in which it gave priority to India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and wanted to have close relations with them.<sup>3</sup>



In the 1980s, India-Maldives relations entered in a very important phase when in 1981. In that year, both countries signed the Treaty of Friendship. Also, in 1980s, the Maldives witnessed a coup d'état, in which India intervened in favor of the ruling system and carried out an operation under the name of (Operation Cactus) and saved the Maldives from this great challenge. An atmosphere of trust and close relations have been established between the two countries.<sup>4</sup>

The economy of Maldives is mainly based on tourism and most of the Indians go to this country for tourism because it is located closer, the costs are low and it has beautiful sceneries, so India has extensive cooperation with Maldives in the economic, infrastructure, and security sectors.

#### REASONS FOR RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

1- Transfer from India to China: Maldives in 2023, after the success of Muhammad Moezo in the elections of September 11 and the priority of the foreign policy of the Maldives towards China is one of the most important reasons for India's frustration and the deterioration of relations. After winning the election, Muhammad Muezo traveled to China before India and when he returned from his trip to China, he told the media that Maldives is not a colony of any country, we are an independent nation and we are not under the orders of any government.

He also said that we are a small country, but it does not mean that every country should threaten us and then accept their words.<sup>5</sup> The main focus of all these talks was India.

2- Using insulting words to Modi by some ministers of Maldives: When Narendra Modi visited the Indian island of Lakshadweep and wanted to send a message to Indians to come to this Indian island for tourism instead of Maldives, three of Maldives ministers used some insulting words to Narendra Modi on their X (former Twitter). It is worth mentioning that Maldives condemned the barbaric attacks of the Zionist occupation regime on Gaza and India has confirmed Israel's position.<sup>6</sup>

India is a strategic partner of Israel and is a supporter of the current attacks on Gaza by Israel, and the Maldives as an Islamic country supports the Muslims of Gaza and has condemned Israeli attacks. Disagreement also hurts relationships. Also, under the leadership of Modi, India has formed a pro-Hindu religious government, which is mostly not in favor of Muslims, and Maldives, as an Islamic country, has also understood this issue. After the writings of the three Maldivian ministers on social media, common people in Indian social media came to Modi's defense and demanded a break-up of relations with Maldives. The Indian government also condemned this act and summoned the



Maldivian ambassador to Delhi. Muhammad Moezo terminated his three ministers and said in an official statement that this is not the official policy and position of our government. This also hurt the relations between the two countries.

- Notice to withdraw Indian troops from Maldives: After becoming the President, Mohammad Mueizu gave India ultimatum until March 15 to withdraw its 89 troops from Maldives. India has 89 soldiers in three large naval ships in the form of military bases in different islands of the Maldives, and through this, India wants to establish security in this area and prevent any threat to India and the Maldives, but Maldives consider the presence of Indian troops as a threat to its freedom, and for this reason, Mohammad Muizvu asked India to withdraw these soldiers so that the Maldives can become fully independent. This is the third reason that has negatively affected the relations between the two countries.

#### **NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN**

Maldives is economically dependent on India. Based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics in 2019. Since last year, 45,000 Maldivian people have been working in the tourist islands, which constitutes 7 percent of the working people of the Maldives. Also, this year, the Maldives earned 3.17 billion dollars in income from tourism, which is 28 percent of the annual income of the Maldives and 60 percent of the income from foreign routes. From the 2011 to 2023. Indians are a quarter of these tourists annually. It is clear that the tourism of Maldives is based on India and this bad relationship can have negative consequences for the economy of Maldives.

Also, India is the most important place for Maldivian citizens to seek medical treatment. Based on the data of 2021, India is the only country where Maldivian citizens visit the most for medical treatment. Apart from this, India provides a wide range of higher education facilities to Maldivian citizens and gives them scholarships. Also, India has always helped Maldives in crises like in Tsunami of 2014. During the drinking water crisis and the coronavirus, if the relationship deteriorates,<sup>7</sup> it will hurt all these areas and may have negative consequences for the Maldives in the above areas, but if the relationship with China becomes closer, therefore, instead of India, China may cooperate with the Maldives in all these areas, and these negative consequences will also be reduced a little.



The negative result for India will be that it will lose a country under its influence in its region (South Asia). Also, the emergence of China's influence in this region will be another negative consequence and besides this, there may be some security concerns for India, because India had a wide dominance in the security sector of Maldives, 70% of the Maldivian defense forces are trained by India. India is heavily involved in their weapons, skills, and other security aspects, so if India withdraws its troops from the Maldives and relations remain bad, then India will stay away from the security sector of the Maldives and it will create some security concerns for India.

### THE CHINA FACTOR

The world is rapidly moving towards multi-polarity, and in this kind of international system, the great powers will participate according to their power. India is a strong regional power and has an important place in international politics.

In Asia, India has a geopolitical conflict with China, a global power. India is a member of the alliance called QUAD and the main purpose of this alliance is to prevent China's influence. This alliance is funded by Americans. China is trying to gain influence in South Asia and in this regard, it has made these countries largely self-reliant by investing in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Maldives is another South Asian country that China is trying to get it out of India's control and influence, and after the success of Mohammad Mueez, it seems that China is winning over India in Maldives.

After winning the election, Moizo traveled to China before India and was there from January 8 to January 12. During this visit, he signed 20 agreements with China, including agreements on economic and investment cooperation through tourism and establishment of an economic belt and road Initiative. Also, in the field of security, the two countries have signed agreements, especially in the implementation of the Global Security Initiative. These developments have caused concern to India on the one hand and the other hand to Japan, Australia, and the United States of America in the region because these countries are trying to prevent China's influence in the region.

During this visit, China and the Maldives also signed an Action Plan for Building a China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Partnership. They also cooperate this strategic partnership brought the Maldives completely under China's security framework. China is trying to increase its spy ships in the Indian Ocean and maintain its security from this place. Maldives can also cooperate to achieve this goal. <sup>8</sup>



During his election campaign, Muizou had raised the slogan (India Out) and after his victory, he placed China as the first line in his foreign policy. In 2023, Maldives did not attend the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) in December.

This security council was initiated by India in 2011 and currently, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Mauritius are members. Since the security meeting is centered on India, Maldives did not participate in the same time Maldives attend another similar meeting called by China in the security sector, it was created on China's initiative (China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development and Cooperation (CIOFRDC) and the president sent his deputy Hussain Mohammad Latif to this meeting. This meeting is similar to the meeting held at the initiative of India and the interesting thing is that both meetings are held in December of 2023.<sup>9</sup>

China wants to gain influence in the Indian Ocean not only to solve security concerns but also to achieve its economic goals because in this region there is an important Strait of Malacca, which is the most important economic route for China. The United States of America and India want to make these routes difficult for China, so to eliminate these economic and security concerns, China wants to expand its influence in the countries located in the Indian Ocean, and the Maldives is one of these countries.

In short, the transition of the Maldives to China has security and economic concerns for India, and to eliminate these concerns, India will put any kind of pressure on the Maldives to withdraw from China, or at least to respond to some of India's concerns. So far, the China factor has played an important role in the deterioration of the relations between the two countries, and this factor may further deteriorate these relations in the future.

#### RESULT

India and Maldives have had close historical relations since 1965.

During the year and especially after the 1980s, Maldives was mostly dependent on India in terms of economic and security.

After the success of Maize in Maldives, Maldives made a big change in its foreign policy and shifted from India to China. India is concerned about the work of the Maldives as a regional power and rival of China, because on the one hand China's influence in Pakistan and on the other hand China's influence in the Maldives on a large scale, both of which are shared by India. The border has created



security concerns for India and the Chinese factor has played an important role in the deterioration of the relations between Maldives and India, along with other reasons. Bad relations between India and Maldives have negative consequences for Maldives in terms of economy and security for India. Also, the international system is rapidly moving towards multi-polarity and this system includes the competition between China and India. The Maldives considers their competition as an opportunity and tries to enjoy its security and economic benefits through them.

#### SUGGESTIONS

1- As an independent state, the Maldives has the right to organize its foreign policy based on its interests, but in order not to become a competition between the great powers, it is better for Maldives to maintain a balance in foreign policy between India and China.

2- India should not look at Maldives as a colony, respect its national sovereignty, and interact with them as an independent state.

3- The fact that the international system is moving towards multi-polarity, so it is an opportunity for small states to take advantage of the competition of big powers and protect their economic and security interests. Afghanistan should also prepare for these opportunities.

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مخکینی مأخذ. <sup>6</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rahul M. Lad & Ravindra G. Jaybhaye. Reciprocal Alliances: Unpacking the Mutual Dependence of India and Maldives, The Geopolitics, March 2, 2024, Access link: <https://thegeopolitics.com/reciprocal-alliances-unpacking-the-mutual-dependence-of-india-and-maldives/>

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