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CHINA IN MALDIVES: INDIA'S OPTIONS

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The extension of political emergency in Maldives resulting from the arrest of two judges and a former president by President Abdulla Yameen indicates how deeply this island nation is in the throes of yet another great game in the Indian Ocean region. Traditionally considered as India's backyard, the dynamics of power in Maldives have altered dramatically over the last two decades. India's leverage based on its successful intervention during the 1988 political crisis appears considerably undermined by China's heavy infrastructure investment in the region. Bearing in mind China's approach in Doklam, the question that now arises is whether China, in its quest for regional dominance, is attempting to tie down India in its own neighbourhood?

Maldives, today, is grappling with a deeply polarised society, religious fanaticism – with an estimated 200 Maldives citizens joining the Islamic State – and an economy dependent on high-end tourism. Its geographical precariousness is not lost on any East Asian power as the southern part of this island chain

provides two passages (SLOCs) through which the Middle Eastern oil transits to countries like Japan and China. Political reforms initiated in 2004, followed by the approval of a new constitution in 2008, have largely failed as social and political unrest since 2011 has pressed Maldives towards autocratic governance. While the constitutionality of the transfer of power in February 2012 is still debatable, India lost a critical opportunity to influence the outcome of the political crisis as it remained upset by the cancellation of the \$500 million project to manage the Male International Airport that had been earlier awarded to the Indian company, GMR.

On the contrary, Maldives' congruity to China has been steadily increasing ever since Beijing opened an embassy in Male in 2011. The two countries have signed Agreements on the Joint Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation (JCTEC), the MoU on Foreign Ministries' cooperation, MoU on promoting Male-Hulhule Bridge project construction, and the MoU on health cooperation during the

Chinese President's historic visit to Maldives in 2014. Yameen also made way for foreign parties to invest above \$ 1 billion to lease land on the project sites on a freehold basis through a constitutional amendment in 2015, eventually providing China a strategic foothold over the southern atolls. Besides endorsing the Maritime Silk Road under the BRI Initiative, Maldives has now become the second South Asian country to sign an FTA with China. Cooperation has opened up in several other fields like health, tourism, technology and climate change.

With China's increasing inroads into the Maldives, India remains concerned about the nation slipping into a debt trap with the Chinese as previously observed in case of other South Asian countries. India is also concerned about Chinese warships entering the Indian Ocean region, with reports of a fleet of destroyers, at least one frigate and a 30,000 tonne amphibious transport dock and three support tankers in February 2018.¹ Reports of a Joint Ocean observation Station located in Makunudhoo island which will act as a watching station and a listening post along with radars and SIGINT (Signals intelligence) facilities and which will also have 'military application with provision for a submarine base' have led to increased scaremongering.² This is in addition to the Feydhoo Finolhu, the island in Kaafu atoll; previously used for Maldives Police Service activities, which was sold to a Chinese firm for USD 4 million for 50 years in December

2016. Meanwhile, the Indian project to set up 10 Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems (CSRS) in the Maldives continues to be in limbo.³ Through these overtures, China has made clear its intent and capacity to intervene on behalf of the current regime as and when necessary, thereby constraining India's options.

India's diplomatic challenge is augmented by the lack of precedent on intervening at the behest of a former president despite the fact that Maldives is dependent on India for trade and security. Military intervention would also be counter-productive as it would reinforce India's image as a domineering hegemon which would not hesitate to use force in its neighbourhood instead of allaying the fears of its smaller neighbours. The current regime's decision not to participate in 'MILAN' naval exercises – that precede China's rise and have been held for more than two decades to strengthen cooperation on maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief – though ostensibly due to political turmoil at home, demonstrates an undercurrent of massive tilt towards China.

In consequence, India now has to choose from an array of softer options, that is, to slowly and gradually facilitate democratic resurgence allowing pro-Indian establishments to take root. Second, it needs to revive and capitalise on the historical ethnic Tamil linkages inherent in language and culture to counter the threat of Islamic radicalisation in the island. The current

official language, Dhivehi, belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family having similarities with Elu (the ancient Sinhalese language) and reviving this linguistic sub-stratum through people-to-people contacts could benefit communities in both countries. Cooperation on the exchange of traditional Buddhist knowledge could also be opened up as Buddhism was the predominant religion in the Maldives at least till the 12th century. Third, instead of imposing economic blockades, enhancing the tourism potential of the nation could help India bring Maldives back into its fold; tourist potential from other East Asian countries could also be furthered and India could also make fresh proposals for projects instead of harping cynicism from the past. This would also call for recalibrating the bilateral relationship through increased exposure for Maldives into India's business mechanisms and trade practices and some compromise on India's side in terms of cheaper interest rates for commissioned projects. India could also informally seek accountability in terms of Maldives' commitment to its *India First policy* and its sensitivities to India's interests.

Though China's resort to gunboat and debt-trap diplomacy in the Maldives islands is indicative of the relentless pursuit of its grand ambitions through the Belt and Road Initiative, yet China faces significant vulnerabilities that could be benefitted from. For instance, not all has turned out well for China, as in the case of Sri Lanka, where regime change has led to

cancellation of projects and delays in implementation. India can also influence the security architecture by providing leverage for other regional players on the island. Thus, India should perhaps carefully manoeuvre soft-power diplomacy in its neighbourhood for long-term windfalls.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹Pacific Beat, Chinese warships enter East Indian Ocean amid Maldives crisis, indebted Pacific nations alarmed, February 21, 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-21/chinese-warships-enter-east-indian-ocean-amid-maldives-tensions/9469836>

² Sachin Parashar, China's ocean observatory in Maldives sparks fresh security concerns, February 26, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/chinas-ocean-observatory-in-maldives-sparks-fresh-security-fear/articleshow/63072040.cms>

³ India has so far set up three CSRS, last of them in 2015.