



Maldives: Troubled Waters in the Indian Ocean and Growing Relations with China

OE Watch Commentary: The Maldives, an archipelago of some 1,200 islands, located about 745 miles from India's mainland and 435 miles from India's Lakshadweep island chain, are locked in a political tug-of-war between India and China. The root of the concern is centered on the Maldives' shift in loyalty from longtime-ally India to China, beginning in 2012, when former president Mohamed Nasheed, who is pro-India, resigned following weeks of opposition-led protests.

Sudha Ramachandran, an independent journalist and researcher based in India, explains in the first accompanying article from *The Diplomat*, that India had strong relations with the Maldives from 1965 until Nasheed's "forced" resignation. She explains that while India had "played a critical role in building the Maldives' economy and ensuring political stability there," after Abdulla Yameen, who is pro-China, took over the presidency in 2012, the Maldives began shifting toward China for support on massive infrastructure projects. More recently, both countries have entered into a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), in which there are zero tariffs over 95 percent of the goods traded, and an opening up to the world's largest consumer market (China) would result in bigger financial gains for the Maldives – a seemingly irresistible proposition.

The second article, from the *South China Morning Post*, explains some of the political turmoil taking place in the archipelago. In addition, Nasheed, who may be seeking re-election, has been urging India to become more engaged with the Maldives. He also went on record accusing China of "land-looting," as noted in the last article from *Xinhua*, an accusation that China vehemently denies.

The potential implications, some of which have been well documented in the first article, are clear. As the Maldives, whose primary source of revenue is derived from tourism, accepts more and more aid and business from China, it could become financially beholden to the Asian giant. The Maldives, while a popular tourist destination, is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, situated in "proximity to international sea lanes through which two-thirds of the world's oil and half of its container shipments pass." It is also ideally located to play a key role in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Also worth highlighting is China's timing in offering support to the Maldives. According to the *South China Morning Post* article, China's offer of support came just as Nasheed, "who was expected to stand for election under the opposition party later this year – called for military intervention from India." India has joined the United States and Britain in calling for Yameen to abide by a court ruling that gives Nasheed the power to run again. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**

“China now already has 17 islands in the Maldives and this is a looting...”

Source: Sudha Ramachandran, "The China-Maldives Connection," *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-china-maldives-connection>

Relations between India and Maldives go back several centuries. This relationship grew in the decades following Maldives' independence from British colonial rule in 1965 and strengthened in the 1980s and 1990s. India played a critical role in building Maldives' economy and ensuring political stability there. It supported the authoritarian rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, a half-brother of the current president, and enabled him to remain in power for three decades. It even dispatched troops to Maldives to avert a coup attempt to oust Gayoom in 1988.

India's influence over Maldives began fraying after former President Mohamed Nasheed, who was perceived as India-friendly, was forced to resign in February 2012...

Until 2011, Maldives was not a priority in China's foreign policy; Beijing did not even have an embassy in Male. However, Sino-Maldivian relations have grown remarkably since Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the archipelago in September 2014. China's presence, especially in Maldives' tourism sector and infrastructure building, has expanded. It has replaced Europe as Maldives' largest source of tourists. China is funding and building mega infrastructure projects, including the Friendship Bridge linking Male to Hulhule Island and a 1,000-apartment housing project on Hulhumale, a suburb built on reclaimed land.

Source: Kinling Lo, "China Seeks Healthy Ties with Troubled Maldives Amid India Rivalry," *South China Morning Post*, 9 February 2018. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2132757/china-seeks-healthy-ties-troubled-maldives-amid-india>

...Maldives President Abdulla Yameen announced a 15-day state of emergency in the luxury tourist hotspot on Monday, triggered by a Supreme Court ruling last week to free political prisoners and opposition politicians. Yameen rejected the ruling and detained two judges.

The Maldives sent envoys to China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to brief them on the political crisis, but no envoy went to India because the dates were not "suitable", according to the Maldivian embassy in India.

The bid for support from Beijing came as the Maldives' exiled former president Mohamed Nasheed – who was expected to stand for election under the opposition party later this year – called for military intervention from India, which has joined the United States and Britain in calling for Yameen to abide by the court ruling.

Since Abdulla Yameen became president of the Maldives in 2013, economic ties with China are the closest they have ever been. Through its belt and road strategy, Beijing is trying to revive old trading routes on land and sea, linking China across Asia to Africa and Europe. Chinese funding has gone towards an airport upgrade, land reclamation projects, resorts, roads and housing in the Maldives as part of the ambitious trade and infrastructure initiative.



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Source: Zhu Ruiqing and Tang Lu, “抹黑中马合作不负责任 (Irresponsible to Discredit China-Maldives Cooperation),” *Xinhua*, 14 February 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-02/14/c_1122419142.htm

Former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed recently said when interviewed by an Indian news medium, “China now already has 17 islands in the Maldives” and this is a “looting” of the Maldives’s land. Nasheed’s remark, which was a malicious fabrication of facts to discredit China-Maldives cooperation, met with strongly worded refutations from local people with breadth of vision and the Chinese embassy in the Maldives.



Asia Map with Maldives Circled.

Source: By TUBS, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maldives_in_Asia.svg, CC BY-SA 3.0.