

MALDIVES: A CASE OF POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM

BY

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India is perceived as a big brother with domineering attitude overshadowing the politico-economic growth of her smaller neighbours, notwithstanding their own structural fault lines. The notion of equal status syndrome and concomitant national ego also plays up prominently in their political conduct. Whereas, **India has proven to be a dependable regional anchor with her resources and capabilities of all hues to bail them out in crisis situations.** Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar have been the beneficiaries of Indian patronage.

It is the military geography of these nations which has brought them into focus of bigger geo-political grand games being played in the Indo-Pacific region as on date. The strategic interests of US and China in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) has changed the political complexion of traditionally Indian area of influence for centuries. The US has transcontinental influence as the sole super power and IOR happens to be one of their theatres of interests. Whereas, **this region is the life line of China as 90% of their trade and 70 % of energy flows through Indian Ocean.**

China, in order to take care of her politico-economic insecurities, have embarked upon securing their sea lanes by establishing military out posts in the Indian Ocean in littoral countries alongside politico – military encirclement of India perceived to be a rival and a potential trouble maker in their designs. **The Chinese mechanism to charm these impoverished small countries is through irresistible financial and development packages, alongside military benefits.** Maldives, with her strategic location in the Indian Ocean, is one of the countries which fits into this Chinese geo-political grand game.

Maldives, an island nation has been beneficiary of Indian patronage all the while, including a military operation on their request in Nov 1988 to safe guard her sovereignty. However, the bilateral ties with India have nose dived recently after India criticized the current Abdulla Yameen government for imposing emergency in the island country which had potential of breaking down the democratic institutions resulting in political chaos. As a sequel, Maldives refused to join the multinational MILAN conclave conducted biennially by

Indian Navy and also expressed their inability to participate in defence expo being held in Chennai in early April, besides their delightfully vague and evasive stance on certain political issues. **All this has happened, despite Indian strategic patience and refusal to intervene in their internal matters reflective of Indian political maturity.**

Maldives, apparently, is indulging in political defiance **with obvious prompting by China** who has invested heavily in Maldives with an aim to replace India as their anchor. **China has designs to establish a military base at Lammu atoll as it sits at the entrance to the one –and –half degree channel**, a major international shipping passage through the Maldives. Therefore, Maldivian insistence on recalling Indian ALH Dhruv from Addu atoll and non renewal of LoE to another ALH stationed at Laamu atoll seems to be an action to accommodate the Chinese interests of denial of surveillance of their activities in Southern Maldives.

The reported visit to Maldives by Pakistani Army Chief on 01 Apr amidst ongoing internal political crisis is another point of concern from Indian perspective. The significance of this visit needs to be seen in the light of apprehensions of current pro Chinese ruling dispensation of a possible military intervention by India on behest of their former president in exile. Therefore, it obviously is not an innocuous good will visit by a military head to a neighboring country. It, appears to be a transformational military diplomacy at display by China and Pakistan combine. The report of increased Chinese naval presence around Maldives further adds to this hypothesis.

The ongoing political maneuvering in the island nation are indicative of plans to facilitate Chinese presence as a stake holder in Maldivian affairs, which was not the case earlier. Moreover, Pakistan with their known complicity with China to destabilize India, probably is being propped up by China as a co security provider for Chinese interests in the IOR. Pakistan with her Islamic credentials is expected to be easily accepted by the Maldives populace. Therefore, there **seems to be beginning of a reckonable strategic shift in favour of China and Pakistan combine, with an objective of encroaching upon predominance of India in the IOR.**

On the face of it, India seems to be on back foot for not wresting the political initiative in the initial stages of the crisis in the island nation in her back yard. That may not be the true picture, as India is reasonably active to neutralize the

Chinese influence in the IOR , through appropriate politico- military measures with cooperation of friendly littoral countries .

India, as on date, is not a push over given her strategic stature, economic buoyancy and proven military strength. Besides this, India has a reasonable counter veiling political support of comity of global heavy weights. **The military geography of India would always outweigh Chinese presence as their main land is more than 4000 nautical miles** from the heart of Indian Ocean. Besides this, China has to reach Indian Ocean through number of bottle necks dominated by countries with whom they do not have best of relations. The presence of ten heads of states of ASEAN countries on Indian Republic day is indicative of Indian political clout in the region. Therefore, **China with her more than 90% of trade flowing through Indian periphery cannot afford to mess up with India beyond a point.**

In fact, **the Chinese designs of establishing military bases is reflective of their defensive mind set to take care of her insecurities,** albeit with a **hype of “ offensive defence”** doctrine at the best. Such a situation is here to stay, manifesting in enhancing Chinese insecurity quotient leading to higher compulsion to appease Maldives as they have lot at stake in their scheme of politico-economic expansion. Even India has to increase her politico-economic support to Maldives so as to motivate them not to indulge in activities inimical to Indian interests.

Maldives appears to be leveraging the new found strategic opportunities to extract higher political mileage both from China as well as India. Even the extra regional forces leads by the US are also feeling the heat of increasing Chinese influence into Maldivian political space. It may well add to opportunities for Maldives to exploit in times to come.

India needs to operate from position of strength and be capable of taking care of inimical forces trying to encroach upon her strategic space on her own in a decisive manner. To do that, **the Indian Armed Forces, in particular, need to be reoriented and synergized to operate beyond present defensive doctrine with requisite offensive content as the threat happens to be emanating from standoff distances** over land, air, sea and cyber space. It is time to change the strategic priorities and its pace to expose Chinese bluff.

Views expressed are personal

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