

**SHIFTING SANDS IN MALDIVES: PARADIGMS OF MILITARY  
GEOGRAPHY AND ITS GEO-POLITICAL AFFLICTIONS**

**BY**

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There appears to be a political rebellion of sorts on the horizon the way Maldivian ruling dispensation is conducting their business when looked at from Indian perspective. In that, the primacy of the Indian patronage seen all these years seems to be declining at a fast pace. **A back of the palm reality check indicates that probably India has been lax in sustaining the soft power and the emotional chord it enjoyed in the island nation.** Small nations like Maldives with no resources of their own other than bountiful natural beauty, obviously, get attracted to the lucrative economic perspectives especially when it comes their way easily sans complicated preconditions. In present day materialistic world, whosoever packages their service wares better gets the nod irrespective of past precedence.

**China, in pursuit of her geo –political agenda of overseas economic expansion and concomitant security of her mercantile shipping has been indulging in establishing logistics out posts with military orientation in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).** To do that, they have removed all stops to reach out to the impoverished South Asian and littoral countries to develop their infrastructure and industry with Chinese expertise and capital. As a result all nations in Indian immediate periphery seem to be shifting into Chinese folds one by one. So, the political trends in Maldives were waiting to come sooner or later, hence there is nothing unexpected. **China, surely, is encroaching into Indian area of influence and occupy the strategic space seen to be neglected by India.**

The phenomenon is reflective of Indian failure to transform from a big brother image to a trusted friend in dealing with her neighbours, thereby

creating a window of opportunity for extra regional forces to exploit their vulnerabilities. The focus of the Indian policies, obviously, is more on trials and tribulations of bigger issues which impact the political landscape, national security and economic wellbeing of burgeoning masses within her limited resources. Moreover, India is seen to be perennially mired in petty domestic politics leaving little scope for looking at the aspirations of her smaller neighbours. Whereas, **the small nations flaunting the tags of equality with inflated egos and intransigent attitude are seen to be needling India to extract political leverages of unjustified dimensions at times.**

What is happening in Maldives is part of this narrative seemingly pushed by the president Yameen who is clearly doing Chinese bidding in return of liberal politico-economic packages. The prospects of personal political buoyancy may also be a motivation for pro Chinese leanings of the Maldivian president. The China as a reckonable global economic power surely is seen as a better patron from Maldivian perspective. The political leanings of opponents of president Yameen towards India may also have prompted him to anchor his lot with the Chinese. Apropos, India despite all the pro active support to the island nation in crisis situations including military operation to save their sovereignty seem to be on back foot in averting political opportunism amongst section of the Maldivian society.

The reason for present transformational situation lies in the ongoing global political flux. **It is the military geography of Maldives which has brought her 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 IOR has changed the political complexion of traditionally Indian area of influence into a global competitive field. The US has transcontinental influence as the super power and IOR happens to be one of their theatres of interests. The inclusivity of IOR with Pacific Ocean and calling it as Indo-Pacific speaks of the importance accorded to this region from the US perspective. **Maldives, with her strategic location in the Indian Ocean, is one of the countries which fits into this Chinese geo-political grand game.**

The Chinese inroads in Maldives commenced with declaration of OBOR scheme in 2013. Maldives officially joined China's 21st century Maritime Silk Route (MSR) --- part of OBOR which envisions the development of a sea route from China's Fujian province to the Mediterranean Sea via South Asia and East Africa. On the Northern tip of Maldives lies Ihavandhippolhu overlooking seven degree channel wherein goods worth \$ 18 trillion pass through annually. China is involved in an integrated development project which is linked to their MSR scheme.

**On Southern side, it is reported that 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. Accordingly, they, probably, have pressurized Maldives to remove Indian helicopters from Addu and Laamu atolls to deny surveillance of Chinese activities in these areas.

Pursuing pro Chinese policy, the Maldivian parliament passed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China on 29 Nov 2017 in absence of opposition and without requisite number of members violating parliamentary norms. The agreement was not placed in public domain for scrutiny and debate. The document continues to be in shrouds of secrecy till date. It is somewhat similar to the reported CPEC agreement between China and Pakistan wherein there is no clarity on its content known to the public

Besides above, 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 by the military head of Pakistan who has a major say in matters of state policies. It, appears to be a transformational military diplomacy at display by China and Pakistan combine.

It is also reported that Maldives plans to restrict numbers of Indians working in the islands. If the objective of such restrictions is to replace the Indians with local youth to generate employment, it certainly has rationale and logic. However, if it is aimed at reducing Indian foot prints to make way for Chinese or Pakistani work force, it would be an inimical act against Indian strategic interests. The flip side is that Chinese would usurp Maldivian jobs and Pakistanis would bring radicalism impacting moderate Islam as practiced by Maldivian population. It would go against Maldivian interests as they thrive on tourism patronized by liberal western world and any traces of radicalism may not be of their liking.

Off late, Maldives is gradually bringing in Chinese companies to undertake projects contracted with India earlier, albeit at much higher costs. . China has precedence of extracting their pound of flesh once the client states are fully dependent on them. In that, Sri Lanka does not have a very happy experience and had to part with real estate due to default in loan repayment. There are whispers of discontent even in Pakistan as regards to negative connotations of Chinese CPEC scheme impacting on their indigenous industry, employment, and apprehensions of Chinese political intrusion into their internal affairs. Even Maldives may not be in a position to repay back the contractual costs, hence their tango with China may well become their political nemesis.

**There is no doubt that the ongoing political manoeuvring 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.**

**Whereas, China with their main land located more than 4000 nautical miles** from the heart of Indian Ocean, is not in a position to extend

help in crisis situations as India has been providing to Maldives in fragile eco system of the widely spread islands. While, we cannot sanitize a sovereign country from their external linkages in their perceived national interests, **we need to retain our goodwill and keep our responses ready to take care of any inimical contingencies.**

India with her national power and geographical synergies continues to be the best bet for Maldives and other island nations close by. Maldives **as of now appears to be leveraging the new found strategic opportunities to extract higher political mileage both from China as well as India.** It is military geography in play which Maldives is trying to exploit. In that, **Maldives as of now seem to be in euphoria of Chinese easy money ignoring the basic strategic fundamentals of geography and value of her dependable neighbours.**

China is friend to no one and they are here to pursue their own agenda of economic expansion. After acquiring a small toe hold in island nation, the China may aspire to enlarge their turf including intruding into Maldivian political space to take care of her strategic interests.

India understands the ambivalence in Maldivian conduct which probably is a manifestation of aspirations of their leaders to aquire power, albeit with the help of external anchors. **Indian leadership has been following a very mature policy not to get into internal affairs of the Maldives and continue to provide support so as to bring in stability in the politically fragile country.** It is a big challenge for Indian diplomacy to continue the strategic predominance despite Chinese foot prints in Maldives which a new normal in Indian neighbourhood.

The international community is seized with the political inconsistencies in Maldives and its impact on the strategic space in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU has reported to have imposed sanctions which include travel restrictions and asset freeze on the politicians and affiliates of the President Abdulla Yameen. The European Union (EU), US and India are coordinating their efforts to re establish true democratic norms in order to conduct a free and fair elections in the archipelago as it is a pre requisite for political

stability. However, India has not announced any sanctions to pressurize them as of now. Maldives possibly cannot ignore India and it would be in their political interests to revert to Indian strategic folds. Sooner they do the course correction, better it would be for them.

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