

# Explaining The Maldives' tilt towards China

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**Muizzu is reaching out to a number of nations beside China. Diversifying foreign partnerships was one of his electoral promises. Muizzu follows a succession of leaders who have tilted towards either India or China by turn. It is really hard to put all the actions of former Presidents Solih, Yameen and Nasheed squarely in pro-India or pro-China boxes. Muizzu might pursue a similar policy straddling the India-China divide**



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Can the downside in India's ties to the Maldives be halted? President Muizzu's call for withdrawal of Indian military personnel was a snub, but an agreement was also reached allowing "technical personnel" to operate Indian aviation platforms (the first batch has arrived). This compromise is in contrast to Muizzu's hardline position on other issues dividing the two nations.

Male decided not to renew an existing agreement with India on hydrography and skipped the Colombo Security Conclave. Muizzu announced that the Maldives would reduce dependence on India for food supplies (by importing from Turkey) and medicines (by importing from Europe and the US), as well as promoting medical treatment in Thailand and the UAE under the country's healthcare insurance scheme. To strengthen domestic capability to surveil the surrounding oceans Male signed a \$37 million deal with Turkey for reconnaissance drones.

As much as touching a nationalist nerve ahead of elections to the *Majlis* due in April Muizzu is also seeking to diversify foreign partnerships. But does reducing dependence upon one partner (India) by increasing that upon another (China) create equilibrium?

### **Male's Grand Strategy**

As I have argued elsewhere, the Ibrahim Solih regime's public espousal of "India First" was unnecessary, running the risk of a backlash. The people elected Muizzu promising to diversify foreign policy options with greater control over security policy. Muizzu said that he opposed the presence of foreign security personnel "whether it's India or any other country."

It bears mentioning that Muizzu did seek good-faith wiggle room against dependence upon China. While he did indeed make his first state visit to China it was *after* an official visit to Turkey. Just as the Chinese research ship Xiang Yang Hong 03 arrived at the Maldives, the Coast Guards of India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives held the trilateral *Dosti- 16* exercise. The Maldives "are too small a nation to be entangled in this so-called geopolitical fight between bigger nations," Muizzu asserted.

But entangled the nation is. During Muizzu's visit to China in January ties were elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership and 20 agreements were concluded. A "military assistance" agreement has been signed with China allowing free supply of non-lethal weapons and training of the Maldivian security forces. Ironically, in tilting towards China Muizzu is applying a Kautilyan principle: Your neighbour's (India) neighbour (China) is your friend.

India has responded with restraint seeking to mitigate losses. "Politics is politics. I cannot guarantee that in every country, every day, everybody will support us or agree with us," External Affairs Minister Jaishankar said. Earlier, India had sent feelers of "engaging" the incoming administration and Prime Minister Modi had tweeted about "enhancing" the "time-tested" relationship. Once it became clear that Muizzu would not reverse the tilt towards China, India moved to establish the *INSJatayu* naval base in the Minicoy Islands, 135 kilometres from the Maldives.

### **The Lessons**

Should India be alarmed? In 2009 President Mohamed Nasheed signed an agreement with India allowing an Indian security presence, search and rescue missions, joint patrols, and monitoring of illegal Chinese fishing in the Indian Ocean. The successor Abdulla Yameen's government between 2013-2018 launched an "India Out" campaign and a China-friendly policy causing indebtedness (World Bank data shows the Maldives owes China \$1.37 billion, or about 20 percent of its public debt) and the leasing of 17 islands to China. Thereafter, President Solih's "India First" policy restored India's strategic position. President Muizzu has reversed "India First" with a variation of Yameen's "India Out." Muizzu is not unique but one among successive leaders who have tilted towards either India or China by turn.

Thus, Muizzu's public antagonism towards India is not a first. In June 2018, President Yameen had refused to renew the contract for two advanced light helicopters gifted by New Delhi calling for the removal of Indian security personnel. His government fell before it could act. Muizzu had criticised the previous regime for not releasing details of security cooperation with India, but has he released details of the defence agreement with China?

As I have argued here, the so-called pro-India leader Nasheed engineered a split in the governing Maldivian Democratic Party diverting votes from Solih to the breakaway The Democrats contributing to Muizzu's victory. While in opposition, Nasheed had accused China of colonising Maldivian atolls. After coming to power he allowed the opening of the Chinese embassy in 2011. Nasheed turned against China only after being ousted.

If the opposition were pro- India, why have they not explained to the people that Indian troops were in the Maldives on humanitarian missions, not to undermine the nation's sovereignty?

Finally, diplomacy in the shadows is better than diplomacy in the glares. Public targeting of a partner provides first mover advantage but complicates the endgame. The government made two public requests for removal of Indian security personnel in November 2023 expressing "the hope that India will honour the democratic will of the people of the Maldives."

While the President's Office disclosed that "an agreement has been reached to withdraw Indian military personnel," Delhi did not provide a timeline for withdrawal of the troops merely stating that discussions had been held "on finding mutually workable solution to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medvac services to the people of Maldives." Awkward diplomacy shuts doors that must remain open.

### **What Now?**

Can India formulate a joint strategy with other external powers to address setbacks? Quad's achievements lie in the Pacific; US and Australian interests in the Indian Ocean (both opened embassies in Male in 2023) do not necessarily align with India's.

In 2021 the *U.S.S. John Paul Jones* had intruded into India's Exclusive Economic Zone near the Lakshadweep Islands without consent. AUKUS raises the prospect of Australia making strategic inroads into the Indian Ocean at India's expense. Establishment of the *Jatayu* naval base is a message to adversaries and partners alike. Will this restrain the Maldives from tilting further towards China? There are no good answers.

Whether Muizzu has crossed Indian red lines is hard to tell. The agreements signed during his visit to China do not indicate plans to revisit the protocol to establish a joint ocean observation station concluded by the Yameen regime but never implemented. Nor are there indications that Chinese security personnel will replace India's. Chinese projects were reviewed by Solih, but not cancelled. Muizzu might pursue a similar policy straddling the India-China divide.

Muizzu stated that all previous presidents had made their first visit to India, and that he believed this tradition should continue. Evidently, India did not extend an invitation, nor did Prime Minister Modi attend his inauguration. Rather than claiming that Muizzu snubbed India it is better to seek remedy by recognising the structural limitations placed on ties to India in the shadow of Chinese power. That remedy lies in strategic patience accompanied by resolute pursuit of comprehensive national power.

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