

Optimizing India's Smart-Power Matrix in Maldives

Making a Case for Cricket Diplomacy to Balance New Delhi's Hard-Power Presence on the Island

PRATYUSH PARAS SARMA
ANUBHAV SHANKAR GOSWAMI

Abstract

Recently, India has increased its engagement with Maldives. This development coincides with the growing strategic competition between India and China over the Indian Ocean's littoral states. New Delhi has employed a range of hard- and soft-power instruments to operationalize India's smart-power influence in Maldives. However, the "India Out" protests and #saveaddu online campaigns have exposed the lack of equilibrium between India's hard and soft power in its smart-power matrix. This study argues that India needs to prioritize its soft-power inputs in Malé to restore the balance in its smart-power matrix. Therefore, the objective of this article is to offer recommendations on how New Delhi can optimize its hard and soft power by promoting cricket diplomacy as a soft-power tool to enhance India's national influence in Maldives.

In international politics, *power* refers to the ability to dominate and control the actions of others. American political scientist Joseph Nye distinguished between two types of power: hard power and soft power. *Hard power* denotes the capacity to coerce an entity to behave in a specific manner.¹ In academic writing, hard power is typically associated with the neorealist approach, which prioritizes the state's hard power. In contrast, liberal scholars tend to emphasize soft power as an essential component of statecraft.

Nye defines *soft power* as the use of persuasion or attraction, rather than coercion, to achieve one's objectives. Soft power aims to acquire almost everything except for economic and military capabilities, which are components of hard power. According to Nye, "In terms of resources, soft-power resources are the assets that produce such attraction."²

¹ Ernest J. Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 110–24, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

² Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power," 114.

In addition to hard and soft power, there is another type of power: smart power. *Smart power* is the ability of an actor to combine elements of both hard and soft power in a way that they can effectively and efficiently contribute to achieving the actor's goals.³ Success depends on understanding how to blend the components of hard and soft power in a manner that reinforces the intended purpose rather than acting as a barrier. It should be noted that only through optimal integration of hard and soft power can leaders achieve national influence in the modern, digital world.

A strategy that disregards the blending of hard and soft power components will always yield suboptimal results. The US intervention in the Middle East, which aimed to promote democracy, primarily relied on hard power without adequate attention to soft power. This flawed strategy failed to garner public support and rendered the United States unpopular in the region. The lesson learned from the US failure in the Middle East is that *relying solely on hard power will not necessarily yield the desired outcomes for a nation*.

However, achieving effective smart power by optimally utilizing hard- and soft-power resources is not a straightforward task. Major countries tend to fixate on a hard-power approach, and consequently, struggle to find a balance between hard and soft power. Consequently, these countries often fail to achieve the desired level of influence in the countries where they want to exert their power.

India's management of its hard- and soft-power resources in its neighborhood has followed a similar pattern. Some analysts argue that New Delhi's pursuit of a security-centric approach to foreign policy in the region has distorted India's image among its neighbors. As a result, New Delhi has demonstrated a greater preference for hard-power resources to maintain or expand India's influence in South Asia. In response to China's growing influence in the region, India has attempted to maintain its position by constructing ports, such as the Western Container Terminal in Sri Lanka; developing infrastructure, such as roads in Myanmar and Afghanistan; conducting military exercises, such as the Sri Lanka–India Naval Exercise (SLINEX) and India–Bangladesh army exercise (Sampriti); and installing coastal surveillance radar stations in Sri Lanka and Maldives for regional security.

From time to time, New Delhi has also offered economic assistance to neighboring countries facing financial difficulties. In 2022, India provided Sri Lanka with nearly USD 4 billion in financial aid to assist Colombo in addressing a severe economic and energy crisis triggered by a shortage of foreign exchange.⁴

³ Wilson III, "Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power."

⁴ Shubhangi Gupta, "No Further Financial Aid to Crisis-hit Sri Lanka? Indian Embassy Responds," *Hindustan Times*, 20 September 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>.

Foreign aid initiatives and similar measures, although seemingly benign, ultimately function as hard-power tools that rely on tangible resources and may involve more direct and coercive methods (whether symbolic or actual). For example, New Delhi's financial assistance to Sri Lanka is accompanied by an implicit goal to counter China's growing influence in the region and bring the island nation back under India's sphere of influence. Pursuing overt hard-power objectives such as maintaining strategic strongholds or securing alliances can backfire in the long run, seriously compromising a country's influence over target nations. There are already rumors in Sri Lanka that New Delhi may deploy the Indian Army to the island, a claim that the Indian High Commission immediately denied.⁵ Such rumors arise from anti-imperialist sentiments that often fuel a confrontational posture toward nations that rely excessively on hard power without balancing it with an equivalent amount of soft power in target nations.

India's suboptimal application of smart power in its neighborhood has created concerns among its civilizational neighbors regarding its alleged Indo-centric approach. Maldives is the latest country to raise issues about India's overbearing hard-power presence on the island nation. India–Maldives relations have come under scrutiny due to political and economic developments in Maldives and the country's evolving foreign policy direction. Despite the friendly government in power in Malé, a section of Maldivian society has launched a strong campaign called “India Out” in response to increasing defense cooperation with New Delhi.⁶ The driving issue behind such protests is the perception that New Delhi is militarizing the island nation for India's own maritime-security interests. The Maldivian government has asserted that the Indian military was present in the country solely for certain rescue operations, including three rescue-and-surveillance aircraft of the Maldivian armed forces and a medical team at a military hospital.⁷

Another campaign that emerged almost simultaneously is the “Save Addu” campaign, launched by the youth of the Feydhoo Island who are protesting the establishment of an Indian Consulate in Addu City. These frequent campaigns by segments of Maldivian society are a clear indication that New Delhi has been unable to effectively maximize India's influence in the strategically located island nation. This is a cause of concern for New Delhi.⁸

⁵ Wilson III, “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power.”

⁶ Alasdair Pal and Mohamed Junayd, “Maldives' Former President Plots Comeback with ‘India Out’ Campaign,” *Reuters*, 25 March 2022, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁷ Pal and Junayd, “Maldives' Former President Plots Comeback.”

⁸ Fathmath Zunaam, “‘Save Addu’ Is a Campaign Slogan of Opposition: MP Nihad,” *Times of Addu*, 6 June 2021, <https://timesofaddu.com/>.

Maldives, a nation comprising 1,190-island nation, sits on crucial sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).⁹ China's growing influence in Maldives is a direct threat to India's security, and as such, New Delhi cannot afford to let its influence diminish in its own backyard. In order to do so, New Delhi must quickly cultivate its smart power by implementing policies, qualities, and actions that will endear India to Maldives. One way to optimally balance its hard power is through the use of cricket diplomacy, which can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing India's national influence in Maldives.

Cricket Diplomacy in South Asia

Many scholars believe that sports have the potential to shape diplomatic ties between countries. With the growing interest in sports in the world, it has become an important instrument for confidence building and conflict resolution.¹⁰ One of the most notable examples of sports diplomacy occurred in the early 1970s when Beijing invited table tennis players from the United States to visit China during the World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan. This event played a significant role in the improving relations between the United States and China, and in 1972, President Richard Nixon visited China, paving the way for improved bilateral relations. This historical event came to be known as *ping-pong diplomacy*.¹¹

Among various sports, cricket has emerged as a key diplomatic tool for creating bilateral relations, particularly among South Asian countries that have a history of long-standing conflicts.¹² These countries have been plagued by domestic civil unrest and external border conflicts in the past few decades.

Many observers consider India and Pakistan as among the top cricketing powerhouses, particularly among South Asian countries. Introduced by British colonials residing in South Asia in the 1800s, cricket slowly gained popularity and, by 1920, it had become a mainstream sport in British India. India became a test-playing nation in 1932 when CK Naidu led the team to play against England at Lord's. Pakistan followed suit just five years after its formation in 1947. Both countries found joy in the game as they were able to showcase their teams' talents

⁹ Samatha Mallempati, "Internal Developments in Maldives and India-Maldives Relations," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 12, no. 3 (July–September 2017): 243–57, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁰ Ibtesam Mazahir, Aazadi Fateh Muhammad, and Safeena Yaseen, "Examining Sports/Cricket Diplomacy as a Tool to Instigate Political Interests: A Comparative Analysis of Media Portrayal of Cricketing Relations between India and Pakistan," *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology* 17, no. 7 (2020): 6118–60. <https://archives.palarch.nl/>.

¹¹ Emily Crick, "Can Cricket Be Used as Multi-Track Diplomacy in the Context of India's Neighbourhood Policy" (MSc dissertation, University of Bristol, 2006), <https://www.academia.edu/>.

¹² Crick, "Can Cricket Be Used as Multi-Track Diplomacy."

and defeat their colonial masters and other heavyweights such as Australia. The game slowly became a symbol of national pride in these countries, and cricketers became celebrities were sometimes apotheosized.¹³ Thus, it is fair to say that cricket has become a sport that carries tremendous national sentiments in the international arena.

India and Pakistan have been in a state of conflict since their independence in 1947, with numerous armed conflicts and border disputes, The Kashmir issue and the Kargil War of 1999 have further escalated tensions between the two countries.¹⁴ However, cricket has also played a significant role in improving bilateral relations at times. Despite this, any progress made towards better relations is often short-lived due to Pakistan's support for proxy warfare.

The first instance of cricket diplomacy between New Delhi and Islamabad dates back to 1987 when President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan visited Jaipur, India, to watch a cricket match between India and Pakistan. In fact, Zia coined the term *cricket diplomacy*.¹⁵ Two decades later, in 2005, President Pervez Musharraf came to India after a successful cricket series between the two nations in Pakistan in 2004. This tournament followed a series of talks between Islamabad and New Delhi over the course of 14 months, known as *composite dialogues* because they discussed a range of topics regarding normalizing relations. The visits of these two Pakistani presidents provided an overview of how leaders from both countries attempted to reduce tensions between the countries with the help of cricket.¹⁶ Through cricket, people from both countries traveled to each other's countries to watch their teams play and enjoy mutual hospitality. These exchanges lead to the development of a perception of positive relations.¹⁷

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are also cricket-playing nations. Afghanistan, in particular, has made great strides in the international cricket circuit in recent years. Sri Lanka achieved test status in 1981, while Bangladesh earned it in 2000. In 2018, India hosted Afghanistan in Bengaluru for the latter's first test match, marking a significant milestone in Afghanistan's cricketing journey. Other countries, such as Nepal and Maldives, are also beginning to make their mark in the international cricket scene. In fact, Nepal achieved a major upset when they defeated South Africa in the 2018 ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup.¹⁸

¹³ Crick, "Can Cricket Be Used as Multi-Track Diplomacy."

¹⁴ Zoya and Asma Awan, "Indo-Pak Cricket Resumption: A Peace Plan for Resolving the Conflict," *Journal of Indian Studies* 2, no. 2 (July–December 2016): 171–80, <http://pu.edu.pk/>.

¹⁵ Zoya and Awan, "Indo-Pak Cricket Resumption."

¹⁶ Crick, "Can Cricket Be Used as Multi-Track Diplomacy."

¹⁷ Zoya and Awan, "Indo-Pak Cricket Resumption."

¹⁸ Crick, "Can Cricket Be Used as Multi-Track Diplomacy."

How India Is Dominating the Subcontinent

The emergence of India as a cricketing powerhouse began with the stunning win of its team against the two-time world champion West Indies in the 1983 Prudential World Cup. As cricket's popularity surged in India in the decade after the win, the country's economic liberalization of the early 1990s sparked similar growth in the nation's domestic and international economic standing. Along with this, the influence of mass media increased as well. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) skillfully leveraged this opportunity to commercialize cricket in the country.¹⁹

Today, the BCCI has emerged as the wealthiest cricket board in the world. The BCCI has maintained cordial relationships with major corporations since its inception, and the Reliance Group, an Indian conglomerate, funded the 1987 World Cup, cohosted by India and Pakistan. These relationships with business giants for cricket sponsorships have helped to boost viewership.²⁰ In 2014, the Indian cricket team generated around 70 to 80 percent of revenue for the International Cricket Council (ICC).²¹ During the 2019 World Cup, the India's contribution to commercial sponsorship was 350-percent greater than that of Australia, which was in the second place—followed by Pakistan in the third—according to the POWA index global ranking.²² The Indian Premier League (IPL), which played its fourteenth season in 2022, is the world's most lucrative cricket league, generating nearly 60 percent of the BCCI's revenue. In 2021, the IPL's brand value was around USD 5 billion. Therefore, it is significant to note that with such a high brand value, Indian Cricket Has started to export and promote cricket to other countries in South Asia, including Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan, engaging in multitrack diplomacy with neighboring countries through the sport.²³

India–Maldives Relations

Maldives has significant economic, strategic, and military relations with India. New Delhi has maintained cordial relations with Malé since Maldivian independence from the United Kingdom in 1965. A clear example of their friendly relationship can be traced back to 1988 when the Indian government sent troops to

¹⁹ Alyssa Ayres, "How You Play the Game: Cricket, World Order, and India's Rise," *Octavian Report*, 1 September 2015, <https://octavianreport.com/>.

²⁰ Hana Masood, "Smashing Past the Boundary Wall: India's Cricket Diplomacy," *Statecraft*, 6 July 2019, <https://www.statecraft.co.in/>.

²¹ Ayres, "How You Play the Game."

²² Masood, "Smashing Past the Boundary Wall."

²³ Masood, "Smashing Past the Boundary Wall."

support Abdulla Gayoom's democratic government against a coup. Despite this, in recent years, India has been a prominent topic in the internal political debates of Maldives. However, some Maldivian political parties opposed to democratic principles use anti-India expressions to prevent the government from making any economic or political reforms. Indeed, the topic of India has been a prominent factor in the past two presidential and parliamentary elections in Maldives, with some political parties using unfounded misinformation to generate fear of possible Indian intervention to suit their political interests.²⁴

At the same time, China has tried to increase its strategic presence in the Indian subcontinent. Maldives, with its strategic significance, is viewed as a valuable asset in China's pursuit of South Asian dominance. The strategic location of Maldives in the Indian Ocean holds great significance, particularly for Beijing. In fact, China has expressed interest in building a maritime base in one of the Maldivian atolls with the goal of securing China's sea routes, through which it imports vital energy resources from Africa and West Asia via the Indian Ocean.²⁵

Following Mohamed Nasheed resignation from the Maldivian presidency in February 2012, the India-Maldives bilateral relationship went through a tumultuous phase. However, the current Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih's ascension to power in 2018 has restored stability and warmth to the relationship, although it has taken considerable effort from New Delhi to achieve this. The ab-initio termination of the GMR contract by Mohammed Waheed Hassan, Nasheed's successor, was indicative of his anti-Indian stance.²⁶ This decision was not purely driven by internal politics but was also influenced by China's growing presence in Sri Lanka and its expanding influence in the region.

During the Waheed administration and President Abdulla Yameen's tenure, ties with China increased, with some Maldivians appreciating Beijing's indifference to democratic backsliding on the island. Yameen's half-brother and former despot Maumoon Abdul Gayoom had advocated for Malé to pivot away from the West and India and toward China during the campaign for the 2013 presidential elections.²⁷ While the current Solih government has reset India-Maldives ties at

²⁴ Mallempati, "Internal Developments in Maldives."

²⁵ N. Manoharan, "Three Years of the Modi Government India-Maldives Relations: A Tale of Two Concerns," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, June 2017. <http://www.ipcs.org/>.

²⁶ R. K. Radhakrishnan, "Maldives Denies China Role in GMR Row," *The Hindu*, 10 December 2012, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

²⁷ Anand Kumar, "India-Maldives Relations: Is the Rough Patch Over?," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 11, no. 2 (April-June 2016), 158, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

the government level since 2018, there is still a significant section of Maldivians with anti-India sentiments.²⁸

To clearly understand the relationship between Maldives and India, it is crucial to pinpoint New Delhi's interests in the island nation. According to Anand Kumar of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), these interests are:

“Firstly, India is interested in political stability in its neighbourhood, and the Maldives is no exception. Secondly, India would like to prevent the Maldives from falling under the influence of any force (state or non-state) that is inimical to its security interests. These forces can also change the security environment in the IOR. Thirdly, a large number of Indians work in the Maldives, and India is interested in their safety and security. Finally, India would like the investments of its companies in the Maldives to remain secure.”²⁹

Some of India's efforts to further its interests include the signing of the defense cooperation agreement with Maldives in 2009 by then-Indian Defense Minister AK Anthony. The agreement involved joint patrolling and surveillance activities by the naval forces of the two countries in the Indian Ocean. The Indian government also provided assistance in constructing a 25-bed military hospital and a Dhruv helicopter for the island nation.³⁰ Additionally, there were reports of India constructing a system that would connect the ground radars in 26 Maldivian atolls to build a possible network with the Indian coastal command.³¹

However, this agreement faced rejection from some Maldivian politicians who stated that “Maldivian sovereignty was under threat and that the country was becoming an Indian protectorate.”³² Despite these concerns, Maldives continues to cooperate with India on security matters as the tourism industry, which is a key driver of the Maldivian economy, depends on the security in the IOR. To maintain security, India provides assistance by deploying warships and reconnaissance aircraft in Maldives' territorial waters. Both countries have also planned counter-

²⁸ Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, “Understanding the ‘India Out’ Campaign in Maldives,” ORF Occasional Paper No. 371, October 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

²⁹ Kumar, “India-Maldives Relations,” 154.

³⁰ “Joint Statement on the Visit of Defence Minister of India to Maldives” (press release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 17 September 2012), <https://mea.gov.in/>; and Rangoli Mitra, “The China-India Cold War in Maldives.” *ICS Research Blog*, 17 February 2022, <https://icsin.org/>.

³¹ Manu Pubby, “Work Resumes Full Steam on Maldives Coastal Radars,” *Economic Times*, 23 April 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

³² Kumar, “India-Maldives Relations.”

terrorism strategies to prevent any future seaborne attacks on India. The Indian and Maldivian navies conduct regular joint exercises as well.³³

Hard Power Galore; Soft Power . . . Not So Much

Despite India's investment, there has been a rise in anti-Indian protest in Malé. These protests can be attributed to India's emphasis on hard-power investments in Maldives. Therefore, New Delhi must balance such measures with commensurate soft-power investments. India has already demonstrated its intent to utilize soft power to attract strategically located nations toward its orbit and, most importantly, keep such neighbors away from China's influence by building people-to-people relations. A prime example of this is Afghanistan.

When the first Taliban government was ousted from power in 2001 and the national government of Hamid Karzai was beginning to find its feet with the support of the US and allied "boots on the ground," India began investing in Afghanistan's healthcare, education facilities, housing, roadways, and dams. In addition, New Delhi used cricket as a soft-power tool to extend its goodwill to the war-torn populace. Starting in 2015, India began supporting the Afghan National Cricket Team in their journey to success. The Indian government gifted the Afghan cricket board two "home" stadiums, one in Greater Noida, Haryana, and the other one in Dehradun, Uttarakhand.³⁴ With the availability of home stadiums at Dehradun, the Afghan team hosted an international T20 series against Bangladesh.³⁵ Although India did not disclose the estimated value of donating the grounds to Afghanistan, the goodwill that this cooperation and development generated is a testament to India's potential to use cricket diplomacy as a significant soft-power tool.

Cricket can be a significant tool to enhance and strengthen people-to-people relations with Maldives. Given its longstanding history on the islands, India is leveraging the sport to raise the profile of the Maldivian team and foster goodwill across all segments of Maldivian society. In February 2019, the Maldivian Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Community Empowerment sponsored a friendly series

³³ Kumar, "India-Maldives Relations."

³⁴ Masood, "Smashing Past the Boundary Wall." These stadiums are located in India, but served as the homes of the Afghan team.

³⁵ Ratnadeep Choudhary, "The Rise and Rise of Afghan Cricket, with a Little Help from India," *The Print*, 12 June 2018, <https://theprint.in/>.

between India and Maldives, with two renowned Indian cricketers, Harbhajan Singh and Yuvraj Singh, representing Air India in the tournament.³⁶

President Solih, a cricket enthusiast himself, was impressed with India's efforts in shaping and nurturing the Afghan cricket team and expressed his desire for the Indian government to develop cricket in Maldives as well. In April 2019, Solih flew to Bengaluru, India to watch an IPL match between Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) and Chennai Super Kings (CSK). Television and newspaper clips showed RCB and CSK captains, Virat Kohli and Mahendra Singh Dhoni, respectively, gifting their jerseys to a visibly elated Solih.³⁷

Solih requested the Indian government to help in developing the game in his country; in return, India extended USD 1.5 billion in financial assistance to Maldives. The Maldivian president also "requested for a coaching program" for cricketers and training for "coaches, umpires, scorers and match referees."³⁸ Subsequently, the Indian government provided cricket kits to Maldivian cricketers, and in 2019, BCCI officials, as a part of India's initiative, visited Maldives to discuss building a stadium. Finally, it was decided that a cricket stadium will be constructed at Hulhumalé, an artificial island located just northeast of the capital Malé.³⁹

The BCCI tweeted that it would provide a level-2 cricket coaching course for Maldivian coaches that was prepared and arranged by the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru.⁴⁰ However, there is a need for India to do more, as there are significant demands from Maldives to help develop the sport at the national level. A well-tailored policy is necessary to institutionalize Indian efforts in Maldives and fill gaps in Maldivian cricket development.

According to the Cricket Board of Maldives, one of the biggest impediments to cricket development has been the decline of club cricket. The board has acknowledged that "Club cricket has seen ebbs and falls over the past four years. After a revival of club cricket in the early and mid-2000, club and player numbers have dwindled over the last few years. The aim of the next four years will be to halt the decline and revitalise club cricket by improving methods of support to clubs."⁴¹ The board intends to make clubs the primary links between the board and cricket players with clubs serving as the nursery grounds for "the transformation of youth

³⁶ Sudarshan Ramabadrán, "India's Cricket Diplomacy in the Maldives: A Step in the Right Direction?," *Times of India Blog*, 3 March 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

³⁷ Ramabadrán, "India's Cricket Diplomacy in the Maldives."

³⁸ "India to Gift Maldives a Cricket Stadium and Help Develop the Sport in Country as PM Modi Prepares to Visit," *CricTracker*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.crictracker.com/>.

³⁹ "India to Gift Maldives a Cricket Stadium," *CricTracker*.

⁴⁰ Ramabadrán, "India's Cricket Diplomacy in the Maldives."

⁴¹ Cricket Board of Maldives, "Cricket Development," 2020, <http://www.maldivescricket.org/>.

players into players of national calibre.”⁴² The four-year plan aims to establish “at least 10 well governed, well managed and resourced clubs that provide their members with quality coaching, organization, and playing opportunities.”⁴³ Furthermore, the board plans to financially support each club in training and to promote interclub tournaments. Additionally, the board has supported many young promising players in gaining valuable experiences and coaching in Sri Lanka. The development of Maldivian club players is being nurtured in top-level clubs in Sri Lanka, providing the necessary environment for their growth.

India has the potential to assist the Cricket Board of Maldives in developing their young talents by drawing inspiration from Sri Lanka. With a significantly larger budget, the BCCI has the resources to improve the skills of budding Maldivian cricketers using India's top-notch cricket training infrastructure. The BCCI can utilize its elite National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bangalore to groom these talents. The NCA is one of India's most prestigious cricket academies, and it has produced some of India's most accomplished cricketers, including Rohit Sharma, Piyush Chawla, Rahul Dravid, Harbhajan Singh, Kapil Dev, and Anil Kumble.

The BCCI can also team up with other esteemed cricket institutes in India to expose Maldivian players to the best possible training. One of these institutions is the MRF Pace Foundation, which specializes in producing and training fast bowlers. Established in 1987 by MRF Limited, the foundation is backed by Australian cricket legend, Dennis Lillee. Many Indian fast bowlers, including Javagal Srinath, Irfan Pathan, Munaf Patel, and Zaheer Khan, have trained at this academy and gone on to represent India. Additionally, foreign players such as Chaminda Vaas from Sri Lanka, Henry Olonga from Zimbabwe, and Glenn McGrath and Brett Lee from Australia have also undergone training at the foundation.

The NCA and MRF Pace Foundation could collaborate with the BCCI to support Maldivian cricket's junior development. The Cricket Board of Maldives intends to “set up a partnership with interested parties to establish a Cricket Academy which will become the nerve center of cricket development.” The BCCI or the Government of India should incentivize these two renowned Indian institutions to partner with Maldivian cricket and set up its own domestic cricket academy. This would provide an excellent training environment for the island nation.

The Cricket Board of Maldives recognizes that school circuit tournaments are essential to grassroots-level sporting development. To this end, the board plans to establish school cricket clubs in “each of the cricket playing schools in Malé and in interested schools in other islands. The aim is to rationalize the junior develop-

⁴² Cricket Board of Maldives, “Cricket Development.”

⁴³ Cricket Board of Maldives, “Cricket Development.”

ment programme and to create a body within each school to provide cricket coaching and training to all children.”⁴⁴ The objective is to standardize the junior development program and create a body within each school to provide cricket coaching and training to all children. India can assist by organizing exchange programs for Maldivian school cricketers, similar to student exchange programs with foreign educational institutes, to give players exposure to competitive school cricket tournaments like the Mumbai School Cricket or Delhi School Cricket circuit. Combined with other efforts at the school level, these programs will create a pool of young players who can be targeted for focused training.

Maldives is also launching several advocacy and incentive programs to attract girls to cricket.⁴⁵ The India Women’s Cricket Team has become a powerhouse in international cricket, and many players have had to overcome societal pressures to succeed in their sport. The BCCI can send members of the India Women’s team to Maldives as game ambassadors who can inspire Maldivian girls to participate and excel in cricket.

Last but not the least, the coaching environment in Maldives could be greatly enhanced if the BCCI were to offer a coaching development program that provides high-quality educational opportunities for coaches. Recognizing the significance of good coaching, such a program could support and assist school and club-level cricket with a comprehensive coaching module.

Conclusion

The main objective of this article has been to demonstrate how a well-balanced integration of India’s hard- and soft-power tools can effectively enhance its influence in the strategically significant Maldives. In recent years, India’s attempts to exert its influence on the island have yielded mixed results for its national interests, especially at a time when China has established a foothold in Maldives. India’s response to this slow encroachment has largely been through the application of hard power, which, unfortunately, has not yielded the desired dividends. The excessive use of hard power has led to many Maldivians questioning India’s role in their country, and this anxiety is being exploited by Beijing-backed politicians to further destabilize India-Maldives bilateral relations. Hence, it is strategically imperative for the Indian government to launch a comprehensive outreach program to engage with the Maldivian people.

⁴⁴ Cricket Board of Maldives, “Cricket Development.”

⁴⁵ Cricket Board of Maldives, “Cricket Development.”

Of late, cricket has gained immense popularity in Maldives, presenting a unique opportunity for India to utilize this shared love of the sport as a soft power tool for influence maximization. India has previously employed cricket as a means of building capacity and infrastructure in Afghanistan, and this approach has generated lasting goodwill among the Afghan people toward India. To exert effective influence on Malé, India must adopt a similar smart-power approach. By using cricket as a form of soft power to balance its growing hard power presence in Maldives, India can enhance its diplomacy and create a more comprehensive smart power matrix in the country. In short, cricket can play a crucial role in maximizing India's influence in Maldives. ✪

Pratyush Paras Sarma

Mr. Sarma is currently pursuing his doctoral studies in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. His research interest lies in areas related to comparative politics in the developing nation, public policy, and electoral studies. Currently, he is working on his Ph.D. thesis based on party professionalization, social media, and voting in Indian elections. He is also the co-founder of a research think tank in India: Northeast Development Agency (NEDA), an initiative by The Enajoree Foundation (TEF). Email: pratyush.sarma@anu.edu.au.

Anubhav Shankar Goswami

Mr. Goswami is currently pursuing his doctoral studies in the Jindal School of International Affairs at OP Jindal Global University. He also works as a research associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies. He authored an article on "Balancing Grand Strategy for America to Offset Thucydides' Trap with China" published in the *Journal of Strategic Security*. Email: anubhavshankar100@gmail.com.

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