

Navigating the Geopolitical Waters: India-Maldives Relations in a Shifting Global Landscape

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As Union Minister Kiren Riju attends the swearing-in ceremony of the Maldives President on Nov. 17, 2023, the issues surrounding the evolving China-Maldives relations and its impact on India-Maldives ties have gained momentum. It is particularly important due to the historical role played by Indian security forces in the Maldives and the future of these relations under the new regime. India and Maldives share multidimensional relations including ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties. India was one of the foremost countries to recognise the independence of Maldives and was the first country to open resident missions in 1979. Furthermore, it was due to India's intervention in 1988, that the Maldives government could be saved from a coup. Despite this rich history and strong bilateral ties, anti-India rhetoric and slogan such as 'India Out' has been frequently used in election campaigns in recent times. The 77 military personnel from India deployed in Maldives have been asked to leave immediately following the election victory of Present Muizzu.

Maldives has transformed itself from an orthodox republican state to a democracy which was one of the most significant developments in the 21st century. The first multi-party elections to the Majlis (parliament) were held in 2008 leading to the formation of the first democratically elected government. These developments have distanced India and Maldives in recent times, due to the political preferences of those elected leaders in Maldives, who are more inclined to improve their relations with China over India.

These close economic and political relations with China through the Belt Road initiative, the Maritime Silk Route, and the Free Trade Agreement of 2017 may jeopardise the existing arrangements that India signed with the Maldives. Such arrangements include the Defence Cooperation Agreement in 1988 according to which India trains the Maldivian soldiers and the arrangement involving the Indian Coast Guard carrying out regular Dornier sorties over the island nation to look out for any suspicious movements or vessels.

It needs to be understood that the Indian Ocean region is of major significance to India due to which India-Maldives relations hold considerable importance and the same can be ascertained through the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (also called SAGAR) initiated by India.

Hence, the increasing threat posed by evolving China-Maldives relations requires India to recalibrate its strategy towards its South Asian neighbours including the Maldives. Beijing for the last few years has been investing heavily in the South Asian region on infrastructure and connectivity even when such initiatives have been highly criticised by the international community for their economic viability leading to stability concerns in the region. Some of the organisations have also called it the 'One Belt, One Road, And One Debt' policy. The consequences are also felt in different countries including the Maldives. What this means is that the Chinese through their policies are engaging in debt trap diplomacy. Such claims draw their legitimacy through certain findings of institutions like the UN Economic and Social Commission for the Asia Pacific that point out that large-scale grants to developing countries could potentially harm the macroeconomic stability of those countries due to the underdeveloped nature of the market and insufficient debt management capacity. Given the growing dependence of the Maldives on China, India needs to be cautious and rethink its foreign policy focusing on its economic and political relations with the Maldives given the significance of the region for India.

The aim going forward must be to restore the faith that the earlier Maldivian government has bestowed on India and take steps through multilateral efforts such as the SAARC, of which both countries are members, to caution against the rising influence of China to ensure mutually beneficial bilateral relations to achieve peace and harmony in the region.

[Photo by the President's Office, Maldives, via Wikimedia Commons]

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