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India, China Feud over Maldives

By Sarosh Bana

SYNOPSIS

Both India and China have for long courted the strategic island nation of the Maldives as they compete for influence in the Indian Ocean Region. But just when China gained an advantage upon Dr Mohamed Muizzu – the China-backed President of the Maldives – assuming power last November after defeating pro-India President Ibrahim Solih, the pendulum swung back towards India when Muizzu was threatened with impeachment by an unyielding Opposition that enjoys a majority in Parliament.

COMMENTARY

The India factor seems to have turned the tables on China over the tiny but strategic island nation of the Maldives, where China-backed President, Dr Mohamed Muizzu, now faces impeachment after he assumed power just last November upon defeating pro-India President Ibrahim Solih in a presidential runoff in September.

This dispersed archipelago with a population of a little over 515,000 has for long been assiduously courted by its two most populous and outsized neighbours that are competing for influence in this Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both seek to win over the Maldives for its strategic location as it abuts vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) used for trade, logistics and naval forces.

Nearly 50 per cent of India's external trade and 80 per cent of energy imports traverse these maritime routes, the Indian Ocean island nation located just 623km from India's southernmost tip called Kanyakumari.

For China, the Maldives presents a critical link in its "string of pearls" – a chain of civilian/naval ports – seen by academics and media reports as a strategy for encircling India. Beijing has established the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) base at Gwadar in Pakistan. This is adjacent to the Arabian Sea and can link up with the

Maldives off India's south-western coast, then with the port in Hambantota that Sri Lanka has leased out to China for 99 years after a loan default. There is also the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal that offers China an alternative route for energy imports from the Middle East, avoiding the Strait of Malacca.

President Muizzu Ditches his Predecessor's "India first" Policy

A day after assuming power, Muizzu ditched his predecessor's "India first" policy and asked New Delhi to withdraw its naval and army personnel from his country. He described their presence as a threat to Maldivian sovereignty and a prelude to a permanent Indian military base in the Maldives.

Over the past decade, two indigenous *Dhruv* Advanced Light Helicopters and one *Dornier* aircraft donated by New Delhi have undertaken hundreds of medical evacuations and humanitarian missions. India also gifted a Fast Patrol Vessel and a Landing Craft Assault ship to the Maldives last May and has additionally provided 24 vehicles and was building police facilities on 61 Maldivian islands.

Following protracted negotiations, Muizzu announced that Indian military personnel manning the *Dornier* will be recalled before 10 March and the rest, who operate the *Dhruvs*, will return to India by 10 May.

Things came to a head when Muizzu broke with the tradition of Maldivian presidents visiting India first, to pay a five-day visit in January to China which he called one of his country's "closest allies and developmental partners". He signed 20 key agreements on investment, infrastructure, trade, and tourism in his meetings with Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The two sides elevated their ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

Warning that a departure from the historical collaboration with India could potentially jeopardise their country's stability and progress, the Opposition coalition in the Maldives, currently a majority in Parliament, revolted against the President and served notice to impeach him by bringing a no-confidence motion against him.

It remains to be seen how this confrontation plays itself out.

Chinese Moves that Agonise India

India fears the massive expansion – from 38,000m² to 100,000m² – of Feydhoo Finolhu, the nearest uninhabited Maldivian island to the capital Malé that has been leased to a Chinese company for 50 years at an acquisition cost of US\$4 million, maybe for eventually establishing a Chinese military base, possibly for nuclear submarines, as also a listening post to track Indian naval movements in the Indian Ocean.

Chinese investments in the Maldives had surged upon the adoption of Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The two main projects the Export-Import Bank of China is funding at present are the expansion of the Velana International Airport located on Hulhulé Island near Malé and the 2km Sinamalé bridge linking the airport to the reclaimed Hulhumalé Island and beyond.

India's biggest grant-in-aid project in the Maldives has been the harbour at Sifvaru in Uthuru Thila Falhu atoll, for the Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) Coast Guard, the rudimentary maritime service for the territory. The facility was designed to help end the practice of sending vessels to either India or Sri Lanka for maintenance or repair work. India also financed the US\$500 million Greater Malé Connectivity Project to build a 6.74km bridge and causeway linking Malé with neighbouring islands.

To bear down on India in the region, Beijing regularly dispatches research and survey ships and Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs) to map different parts of the Indian Ocean. India has taken umbrage at the docking of Chinese research ship Xiang Yang Hong 3 in the Maldives. The Maldivian foreign ministry, however, asserted that "the vessel would not be conducting any research while in Maldivian waters", but only making the port call for "rotation of personnel and replenishment". There were indications that the ship would remain in the region for around four months.

Defence and security have been the lynchpin of India-Maldives ties since 1988. The Indian military personnel stationed in the Maldives train the MNDF on asymmetric warfare. Under a US\$15.8 million grant, India also handed the Coast Guard a coastal surveillance system in 2022 that comprised 10 radar stations.

In an interview with a TV channel, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar acknowledged that while India's position of strength, with respect to almost all its neighbours, might see it drawn into regional disputes, all concerned should "sit down and talk, in a mature manner".

Sarosh Bana is Executive Editor of Business India in Mumbai, Regional Editor, India/Asia-Pacific Region, of Germany's Naval Forces, and India Correspondent of Sydney-based cyber security journal, Asia Pacific Security Magazine (APSM).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg