



Maldivian Mirage

CHINA POLITICAL TIGHTROPE



*Maldivian Mirage,
China political tightrope!*

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Executive Summary

Maldives under leadership of President - elect Muizzu stands at a strategic inflection point with choices that can reshape its foreign policy and future trajectory. This document delves in depth the dynamics of Maldives' evolving relationship with its two prominent neighbours, India and China.

1. Rise of Mohamed Muizzu:

- Muizzu's political ascent from being Male's Mayor to his anointment as President is both circumstantial and reflection of his political acumen.
- His close ties with Chinese Communist Party hint at a potential pivot in Maldives' foreign policy orientation.

2. India, Maldives and China:

- Maldives historical and multifaceted ties with India are evident in shared cultural links, security collaborations, consistent aid and support during crises.
- China's engagement with the Maldives, though newer, has rapidly scaled primarily driven by the Belt & Road Initiative and infrastructure investments.

3. Economic Relations, Balancing Act:

- While India's contributions like Greater Male Project underpin its commitment, Muizzu hints at diversifying economic partnerships thereby reducing dependence on India.
- This potential pivot could usher in new economic horizons but also throw up challenges, like risk of China's notorious debt traps.

3. Muizzu's Foreign Policy Orientation:

- Muizzu's diplomatic recalibration seems to lean towards Beijing, potentially sidelining the traditionally close ties with New Delhi.
- This shift has implications from economic dependencies to geopolitical recalibrations in the Indian Ocean Region.

4. China's Growing Footprint:

- China's engagements, symbolised by projects like the Sinamale Bridge, position it as a significant player in the Maldives.

- These relationships, while economically lucrative, risk ensnaring the Maldives into a 'debt trap' and challenge the longstanding ties with India.

5. Defense Relations, Navigating Between Giants:

- India's defence rapport with the Maldives has been historic and dependable.
- China's growing influence and potential defense dialogues pose challenges, risking the region's strategic balance.

6. Maldivian mirage, China political tightrope:

- Muizzu's alignment towards China introduces immediate opportunities but has potential long-term implications.
- The pitfalls include economic dependencies, challenges to democratic values and risk of geopolitical tensions in the Indian Ocean Region.

As the Maldives charts its diplomatic future, it faces a conundrum of choices. The allure of Chinese investments and the prospect of diversifying economic partnerships is tempting. However, it's essential to be wary of the potential pitfalls associated with these decisions.

The Maldives' historical ties with India have provided stability and trust. Over-reliance on China could introduce economic, strategic, and political vulnerabilities, challenging the Maldives' sovereignty and its traditionally amicable regional ties. It is crucial for the Maldives to tread this diplomatic tightrope with foresight, ensuring a balanced and prosperous future.

Rise of Mohamed Muizzu

Born in Male, Mohamed Muizzu spent early years in Maldives before leaving for United Kingdom where he pursued engineering. His academic stint in the United Kingdom not only honed his technical expertise but also introduced him to the intricacies of global politics and diplomacy.

Returning to Maldives, Muizzu embarked on a political journey that soon saw him aligning with several political formations particularly the People's National Congress (PNC) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). His technical background and keen understanding of infrastructure development made him an ideal choice for position of Housing Minister, a role he assumed till 2018. His leadership in this capacity was marked by ambitious housing projects aimed at addressing the archipelago's unique challenges. By 2021, his political acumen earned him the position of Male's Mayor, further consolidating his place within the Maldivian political landscape.



People's National Congress (PNC) pro-China candidate Mohamed Muizzu |
Image source: AFP

However, his ascent to presidency in the wake of September 30, 2023 elections was more circumstantial than a direct result of his political manoeuvres. With former President Abdulla Yameen disqualified from the race due to legal entanglements, Muizzu became the flag bearer for the coalition, representing both the PNC and the PPM. Throughout his political journey, Muizzu maintained close ties with former President Yameen, positioning himself as a staunch loyalist. While granting him significant political leverage within the Maldives, this relationship also introduced him to international partners, most notably the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). During his tenure as Housing Minister, and later as Mayor, Muizzu had several interactions with CCP officials, aimed at fostering stronger bilateral ties and securing investments for infrastructure projects. His public statements, including assertion that his party's return to power would "script a further chapter of strong ties between our two countries," highlight the depth of his engagement with Beijing. This connection with the CCP is not merely transactional but is rooted in a shared vision of cooperation, positioning Muizzu as a pivotal figure in the evolving geopolitics of the Indian Ocean region. On the other hand, Muizzu's views on India have been significantly discussed given longstanding ties between the two countries. His position represents a departure from time tested 'India First' policy that his predecessors adhered to. Muizzu's campaign for presidency was marked by skepticism towards New Delhi. He consistently raised concerns about India's political and economic influence in the Maldives. His stance resonated with a segment of Maldivian population that has been wary of India's growing footprint in the archipelago. Muizzu's interactions with Indian officials during his tenure as Housing Minister and

later as Mayor were cordial and focused on bilateral cooperation. However, they were also marked by an undercurrent of seeking a balanced foreign policy, which in many interpretations meant reducing reliance on India.



Mohamed Muizzu participating in the "CPC and World Political Parties Summit" held on 6 July 2021

In contrast to his cautious approach towards India, Muizzu has shown a clear inclination towards strengthening ties with China. His meetings with officials from the Chinese Communist Party, coupled with his remarks about forging stronger ties between the Maldives and China, have further emphasised this tilt. One of the most contentious issues in recent Maldivian politics has been Indian military assets and personnel in the country. Muizzu and his coalition, PPM - PNC alliance, have been vocal about their reservations concerning the Indian military's presence, promising to review and potentially reduce this footprint.

Muizzu acknowledges India's contributions on economic front especially the Greater Male Project, he has also hinted at diversifying Maldives's economic partners. This diversification implicitly points towards reducing economic dependence on India. Muizzu's stance on India is nuanced. While recognising the historical and strategic importance of ties with New Delhi, he appears keen on recalibrating the relationship to ensure a more diversified foreign policy for the Maldives, even if it actually means that his tilt will be more towards Beijing.

This approach, while gaining some domestic support, has raised concerns in the broader Indian Ocean region about the future of Maldives in years to come.

India, Maldives and CCP's China

The Maldives, as a strategic archipelago in the Indian Ocean, has seen its foreign relations heavily influenced by its larger neighbours, primarily India, and in recent decades, China. The historical dynamics of these relationships offer insight into the evolving geopolitical landscape.



Signing of the Maldivian Declaration of Independence in 1965.

Since the inception of diplomatic relations on 1st November 1956, India and the Maldives have fostered a bond characterised by mutual respect, cooperation, and shared interests. India played an instrumental role when the Maldives sought to cement its position on the global stage, specifically supporting its accession to the United Nations in September 1965. This camaraderie has not just been symbolic; it has manifested in tangible strategic, economic, and military collaborations. Strategically, India has consistently acted as a shield, ensuring the security and sovereignty of the Maldives, recognising the archipelago's significance in the broader Indian Ocean landscape. This cooperative defense paradigm has led to high-level consultations on regional challenges, ensuring that both nations operate with synchronised perspectives. Economically, the partnership received a significant boost in 1981 when both nations inked a comprehensive trade agreement, propelling bilateral economic engagements to new heights. Their shared vision for regional economic growth and collaboration is evident as they stand together as founding members of the South Asian



Maldives became the first recipient of Covid-19 vaccines from India, having been generously given 100,000 doses in January 2021.

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and as signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement. On the maritime front, the waters have mostly been calm. In 1976, both countries set a benchmark for peaceful regional cooperation by amicably delineating their maritime boundaries. A brief ripple in this calm sea occurred in 1982 over the Minicoy Island. However, the Maldivian leadership's swift and unequivocal affirmation of not laying claim to the Indian territory showcased the depth of trust between the two nations. The Maldives's strategic

location in the Indian Ocean has made it central to India's maritime interests. India has consistently collaborated with the Maldives on security and defense-related matters. Joint military exercises, maritime security dialogues, and counter-terrorism collaborations underscore this partnership. India's economic footprint in the Maldives is significant. From infrastructure projects to trade relations, India has been a primary economic partner. The Greater Male Project, backed by substantial Indian financial support in 2022, is a testament to this deep economic commitment. India's role as a first responder in times of crisis, be it political, like in the case of 'Operation Cactus' in 1988, or natural, as seen during the 2004 tsunami, or during the Sars-COV2 pandemic under 'Vaccine Maitri' cements its position as a reliable ally.

On the other hand, while China's formal diplomatic relations with the Maldives started in 1972, the actual thrust in bilateral ties began much later, especially in the 21st century. Despite being a newer player, China has rapidly scaled its influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a cornerstone of its engagement with the Maldives. Offering infrastructural development projects, China has positioned itself as a significant development partner. Projects like the Sinamale bridge are symbolic of this deepening economic relation. Unlike India's democratic and human rights emphasis, China offers its investments without these 'strings.' This approach, especially during the tenure of leaders like Yameen, made Chinese investments attractive. As, Maldives is integral to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, aimed at increasing its influence in the Indian Ocean Region. China's infrastructural investments in the Maldives are not just economic but have significant geopolitical implications. In the light of these historical dynamics, President-



During President Yameen's three-day state visit to China in 2017, the Sino-Maldives free trade agreement was one of 12 bilateral deals signed.

elect Muizzu finds himself at a crossroads. While India's longstanding and multifaceted ties with the Maldives offer stability and trust, China's economic might and no-strings-attached approach present tempting opportunities. The intricate history binding India and the Maldives, juxtaposed with the rising engagement from China, will undeniably mould Muizzu's diplomatic strategies. While the task remains to harness the advantages of both partnerships, it's crucial for the Maldives to uphold its national interests and autonomy. A pronounced lean towards China introduces challenges, notably the looming threat of a debt trap. Furthermore, increased Chinese influence risks unsettling the Maldives longstanding amicable ties with India and numerous Western countries.

Economic Relations, a balancing act

Economic fabric binding India and Maldives has been traditionally strong, with projects such as the Greater Male Project underscoring India's commitment to the Maldivian economy. India's investments and infrastructural projects have often been synonymous with the economic development narratives of the Maldives. President-elect Muizzu, while recognising these valuable contributions, seems poised to steer the Maldivian economic ship towards more diversified shores. His intentions to diversify the Maldives economic partners, while a strategic move to shield the nation from over-reliance on a singular partner, is also an implicit indication of broadening economic horizons beyond India. This approach, if pursued, could reshape the Maldivian economic landscape, bringing with it a fresh set of opportunities and challenges. The task for Muizzu will be to ensure that in seeking new partnerships, the foundational economic ties with India, cultivated over decades, are not undermined.



India extended a soft loan of \$250 million to the Maldivian government, offering budgetary support to help alleviate the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

This diversification strategy may be seen as a pragmatic approach to hedge against potential economic vulnerabilities. By expanding its economic partners, the Maldives might aim to tap into a broader range of markets, technologies, and investment opportunities. China, with its expansive Belt & Road Initiative and a demonstrated interest in the Maldives during Yameen's presidency, emerges as a notable contender in this regard. Beijing's deep pockets and penchant for infrastructure projects could prove enticing for Muizzu's administration. However, diversifying partnerships and pivoting towards nations like China also come with their own set of complexities. China's investment strategies, often characterised by heavy lending, have left several nations grappling with the spectre of debt traps. The Maldives would need to exercise caution and ensure transparent terms



The Maldives has secured significant loans from China for various infrastructure endeavours, one of which includes a bridge linking the capital, Male, to the nation's international airport situated on a neighbouring island. (Image courtesy of Yuji Kuronuma)

of engagement to avoid similar pitfalls. While Muizzu's aspiration for diversification is understandable from an economic resilience standpoint of view, it's vital that this doesn't translate into a dilution of the historically warm and multifaceted relationship with India. After all, India's proximity, both geographically and culturally, combined with its consistent support makes it an indispensable ally for the Maldives. As Muizzu navigates these economic waters, striking a balance will be crucial. While diversification is a worthy goal, maintaining and nurturing the foundational ties with India alongside carefully vetted engagements with new partners, will determine stability and prosperity of Maldivian economic landscape.

Muizzu's Foreign Policy Orientation

Mohamed Muizzu's foreign policy orientation highlights a significant re-evaluation of the Maldives' traditional diplomatic leanings. India's ties with the Maldives have deep historical roots. The two nations share cultural, economic, and strategic ties that span decades. From recognising the Maldives independence in 1965 to extending consistent aid, India has been a steadfast ally. India's geographical proximity to the Maldives has positioned it as a primary responder in times of crisis, exemplified by interventions like 'Operation Cactus' in 1988, where India thwarted a coup attempt in the Maldives.



Finished in 2018, the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge stands as the hallmark initiative of China's infrastructure surge in the Maldives.

The economic relationship between India and the Maldives is robust. India is among the Maldives' largest trading partners, with considerable investments in infrastructure, tourism, and development projects. Both countries collaborate extensively in areas like maritime security, counterterrorism, and regional stability, underscoring the shared interests and concerns in the Indian Ocean region. CCP's China on the other hand established diplomatic ties with Maldives in 1972. The relationship's dynamism has relatively been a recent phenomenon under former President Yameen's tenure. China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) offers attractive infrastructure and development projects luring nations like the Maldives into its fold.

For a country graduating from the UN's Least Developed Countries status and seeking alternative investment avenues, China's offerings appear lucrative. While China views the Maldives as a crucial partner in its 'String of Pearls' strategy, aiming to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean

Region. Its increased investment in the Maldivian infrastructure underscores this strategic intent. Unlike India and many Western nations that often tie aid to democratic reforms or human rights considerations, China adopts a non-interference approach, making its investments more appealing to nations wary of external influence in domestic affairs.

Muizzu's meetings and statements concerning CCP suggest a potential pivot from the traditional 'India First' approach. His assertion to script a "further chapter of strong ties" with China is indicative of this tilt. It's essential to understand this in the broader geopolitical context. Muizzu might be attempting a balancing act between India and China, aiming to extract maximum benefits from both nations without overtly leaning towards either of them. Internally, diversifying foreign relations can be seen as a strategy to assert the Maldives sovereignty and reduce over-dependence on a single major power. With the Indian Ocean becoming a hotbed of geopolitical competition, Muizzu's stance can also be interpreted as an effort to ensure that the Maldives remains relevant and influential in regional dynamics. While Muizzu hints at a recalibration of Maldives foreign policy, it remains to be seen how this will manifest in tangible diplomatic and strategic choices. Both India and China offer unique opportunities and challenges and Maldives navigation of this complex matrix will have significant implications for the Indian Ocean region.

China's Growing Footprint its and Implications



Of late, China's engagement in the Maldives has experienced an upward trajectory, especially during former President Yameen's tenure. The broader strategic implications are evident when we delve deeper into specific projects and agreements between the two nations. Sinamale Bridge, a flagship project, connects Male to Velana International Airport. China funded major chunk of this project estimated at around US \$ 126 million thereby cementing its role as a developmental partner. China has embarked on several housing and urban development projects, especially in Male and Hulhumale aligning with the Maldives need for urbanisation and infrastructure upgrades. Two significant structures, Ministry of Foreign Affairs building & National Museum in Male have been constructed with Chinese assistance, marking a symbolic and tangible presence in the archipelago's administrative realm. Moreover, Maldives involvement in Belt & Road Initiative has paved the way for several Chinese infrastructure projects, and proposed Free Trade Agreement is poised to deepen economic ties. With the Maldives' shift from the United Nations' Least Developed Countries status, there was an evident void of international aid. China's readiness to provide alternative investments, especially under the BRI, became a significant lure. China's touted policy of non-intervention in domestic issues, especially during politically tumultuous times, provided the Maldives leadership with a sense of autonomy. This stood in contrast to the conditional aid and concerns from nations like India and those in the West. Both India and China provide substantial aid and investments, China's loans are often seen as potentially ensnaring nations in a 'debt trap'. The Maldives growing debt to China, estimated between US \$ 1.5 billion and US \$ 3.5 billion raises concerns over its economic future and sovereignty. India's historical and cultural ties with Maldives carry a deep-seated mutual trust. China's projects, while beneficial in the short term, may come with long-term

strategic implications, potentially altering the power dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region. While, China's increased involvement in the Maldives signals a shift in the regional power dynamics. While infrastructural developments and economic investments offer immediate benefits, they also carry long-term implications, especially in terms of the debt burden and strategic influence. The Maldives must tread cautiously to balance its partnerships, ensuring that short-term gains don't compromise its long-term sovereignty and regional relationships. The experience of other nations under the BRI, facing repayment challenges, serves as a cautionary tale for the Maldives in its dealings with Beijing.

Maldives Defense Relations

The defense bond between India and the Maldives is built on a foundation of decades of mutual trust, cooperation, and shared strategic interests. This relationship has been punctuated by joint military drills that have not only strengthened operational coordination but have also underscored the depth of mutual trust between the two nations. Deepening this bond, India has consistently assisted the Maldives in augmenting its maritime surveillance capabilities. This includes the notable donation of patrol vessels to the Maldives National Defence Force's Coast Guard and the pivotal role India played in establishing a state-of-the-art coastal radar system in the region. India's deployment of defense assets, such as helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, further emphasise its unwavering commitment to the Maldives security and sovereignty.



11th edition of Exercise EKUVERIN-21 between India and Maldives, held at Kadhdhoo Island, Maldives.

However, the landscape of defense ties is not without its challenges. The Maldives defense dynamics with China, while still nascent, are rapidly evolving against the backdrop of Beijing's broader strategic aspirations in the Indian Ocean Region. China's enhanced naval activities, while not directly involving Maldives serve as a testament to its burgeoning maritime interests. Concurrently, Chinese infrastructure projects in the Maldives, although economically driven, have inherent strategic dimensions due to their potential dual-use capabilities. There are murmurs of defense dialogues between the People's Liberation Army and the Maldivian defense establishment, which, if they come to fruition, could indicate a deepening military relationship. These evolving dynamics present a delicate challenge. India's defense ties with Maldives are anchored in its 'Neighbourhood First' policy aimed at regional security and stability. On the other hand, China,

under strategic guidance of Chinese Communist Party perceives Maldives as a crucial component of its 'String of Pearls' strategy. This approach seeks to consolidate Beijing's influence in the Indian Ocean, directly challenging India's preeminence. In light of this, a scenario where the Maldives leans excessively towards China, especially enabling a pronounced presence of the People's Liberation Army raises serious concerns. Such a tilt could upset the strategic balance in the Indian Ocean, potentially culminating in heightened geopolitical tensions. Maldives over-reliance on a dominant power, especially one with a track record of 'debt-trap diplomacy' could endanger its own sovereignty. This, coupled with the risk of alienating a historically close ally like India, might lead to the Maldives regional isolation.

Maldivian Mirage, China Political Tightrope?

President-elect Muizzu's potential pivot towards China represents more than just a change in diplomatic priorities; it is emblematic of the larger strategic recalibrations taking place in the Indian Ocean region. By signalling intent to ratify the FTA with China and potentially sidelining established defense collaborations with India, Muizzu is not just reshaping the Maldives' external relations but also steering the nation onto a path that could have profound implications for its future stability and sovereignty. Historically, India has been the Maldives' steadfast ally, underlined by multifaceted collaborations spanning defense, economic, and socio-cultural realms. Their bond, enriched by proximity and shared values, has been a beacon of regional cooperation. Meanwhile, China, with its ambitious global aspirations manifested through initiatives like the BRI, presents a newer, seemingly lucrative avenue for countries like the Maldives. The allure of expansive Chinese investments and promise of infrastructural development is palpable. However, beneath this veneer of economic allure lie potential pitfalls. Several nations, after embracing Chinese investments, have found themselves ensnared in what's colloquially termed the 'dragon's debt trap.' This economic strategy, often unintentionally, places the recipient nation in a position of dependency, compromising its financial autonomy and, in some instances, territorial sovereignty. The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port serves as a cautionary tale, where the inability to service Chinese loans led to a 99-year lease of the strategic port to China, stirring concerns over sovereignty and geopolitical ramifications. The Maldives, given its strategic position in the Indian Ocean, is a valuable pawn in the larger game of regional dominance. By heavily tilting towards China, the Maldives risks not only alienating India, its time-tested ally, but also exposing itself to China's sometimes predatory economic practices. Moreover, the promise of non-interference from Beijing, although enticing on the surface, often comes with strings attached. The silent endorsement or indifference towards domestic policies, as witnessed during Yameen's tenure, might be beneficial in the short run but can have long-term repercussions for the Maldives' democratic fabric. Furthermore, the defense dynamics cannot be viewed in isolation. India's historically rooted defense collaborations with the Maldives ensure regional stability and a mutual security umbrella. Sidestepping these ties, especially in favour of an increasing defense rapport with China, might introduce uncertainties. Given the aggressive postures China has adopted in the South China Sea and its border disputes, its defense collaborations might carry hidden strategic objectives. In conclusion, while diversification of partners and seeking economic growth is the prerogative of any sovereign nation, the choices made by the Maldives in this crossroads moment will be consequential. China, despite its economic might and promises, might prove to be a mirage, the pursuit of which could lead the Maldives into a labyrinth of economic, political, and strategic challenges. It is incumbent upon the Maldivian leadership to recognise this imminent risk and tread cautiously, ensuring that today's decisions do not compromise the nation's tomorrow.

Observations

Maldives stands at a crucial juncture with President-elect Muizzu's apparent tilt towards China signalling potential tectonic shift in regional alignments. While the allure of Chinese investments is evident, past patterns suggest that such engagements often come with strings attached, risking economic independence with potential threats to sovereignty. The historical bond with India rooted in mutual respect and shared interests, has ensured stability and growth for the Maldives. As the Maldives navigates its diplomatic path, it's imperative to recognise the long-term implications of these choices. Over-reliance on China, given its track record, might provide short-term gains but could lead to long-term vulnerabilities, threatening Maldives autonomy, regional harmony and its historically enriched and etched relationship with India.

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