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Political and Socio-economic Relations between China and Maldives in the Early 21st Century

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Abstract

The continuous rivalry among the most powerful nations in the Indian Ocean region is not a new idea in modern times. IOR has important marine commerce routes that link with South Asian nations and cover one-fifth of the world's total ocean area. Over the last three decades, China's nautical footprint in the Indian Ocean has grown significantly. Many people believe that the "Open Door Policy" was a turning point in China's 19th-century economic growth history. But in the twenty-first century, Beijing is trying to forge closer relationships with smaller governments in the area to protect their own economic and security interests via the adoption of new, positive policies. The "Treasure Island, or Last Paradise on Earth" Maldives is one of the small islands in IOR. Due to its unique geographical location, the Maldives maintains a close connection with China. China's "Red Dragon or Sleeping Giant" has maintained a warm relationship with the tiny and serene Maldives. We try to observe the traditional and modern relations between China and the Maldives. China's economy relies on the safe maritime lanes in the IOR to deliver energy resources. China always shows interest in the Maldives. This article explores how China has maintained its political and socioeconomic ties with the Maldives since 1972, as well as how the Maldives have recognized its geographic importance in the Indian Ocean region. It also discusses the role of China's government in helping the Maldivians develop projects through MOUs. It also focuses on enhancing the relationship between the Maldives and China.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region (IOR), China, Maldives, India, String of Pearls

Introduction

People refer to the 21st century as the "National Century." In the 21st century, we see drastic changes in geopolitics. China's "self-strengthening movement," or its first attempt at modernization, has gained significance. As we know, China's economic and political footprint is worldwide. Undoubtedly, Europe is a landscape, while East Asia is a seascape. East Asia, known as "Big Giant China," has embarked on a grand journey into smaller South Asia. The Maldives, or island country, is one of them. The Maldives, a group of five islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean, is home to a small population. The diplomatic ties between China and the Maldives started in 1972. Since then, China has been trying to make inroads into the Maldives to fulfill its strategic aims. China has persistently expanded its soft power influence in the Maldives. China's main target is to invest "necklace around in the Indian Ocean," and this strategy is also known as "Pearls Theory." China has shown positive signs toward the Maldives. China undoubtedly values the Maldives for its geopolitical significance, military trade, crucial minerals, and military purposes. It has also continued its support, particularly economically and security-wise. President Xi Jinping initiated the One Belt and One Road project in 2013, reflecting the roots of current Maldives-China relations. The Maldives, as part of the strategic maritime circle of the OBOR initiative, which connects with the South Asian region, has emerged as a significant development partner for China. In the current political climate, China is providing a window of opportunity for the Maldives to find new hope. China helps by sending tourists, building infrastructure, developing their islands, and providing free military support so the Maldives can purchase drones. Opening the Chinese embassy in the Maldives in 2011 was considered the turning point for starting a new friendship journey. Sino-male ties have deepened with the introduction of President Muizzu and his "India out" campaign. President Muizzu's party won the election. And some experts believe that Muizzu's victory will boost the diplomatic dynamism between China and the Maldives. Muizzu says the Maldives does not support any foreign influence over their internal issues and activities. This paper attempts to better understand the Maldivian engagement with China. We have meticulously reviewed the existing literature. A deep investigation into the existing literature identifies the research gaps.

The study's objectives include

This research aims to provide a thorough examination of China's involvement in the Maldives.

1. We comprehend the importance of the tiny Maldives in vast China.
2. We aim to investigate the intricacies of China's involvement in the Maldives.
3. Understanding the past and present political and socio-economic circumstances between China and the Maldives is crucial.

Literature Review

There are many scholarly articles, journals, newsletters, and policy guidelines on China-Maldives relations that provide a comprehensive review of the literature. They are discussed below:

Kutty, S. N. (2019) examined how China's and India's approaches to interest and security dilemmas are visible in these three islands of the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius. This paper summarises the Sino-Indian competition inside the South West (IOR) and offers a thorough assessment of the strategic maritime environment and security challenges between China and India. A more thorough analysis of Indian interests reveals that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has declared the Indian Ocean Region

(IOR) to be of utmost importance and has set out four goals for the region. First, we should defend the interests and territory of India; second, we should focus on strengthening economic and security cooperation; third, we should collaborate to provide disaster relief and humanitarian aid; and fourth, we should adopt a cooperative stance to promote sustainable development. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is characterized by fierce rivalry between Sino-Indians, as well as their concern for these three island states, especially about economic investment and the development of vital infrastructure.

Rashed, A. A. (2018) explores how constructivist approaches impact the balance of power and power dynamics. According to the writer, constructivism is concerned with the role of ideas; it emphasizes the significance of norms and values to maintain good relations between the Maldives and China. This study uses this approach to examine the political, national, and state identities of the Maldives and China in relation to foreign policy. The author demonstrates how the Maldives has embraced Chinese economic initiatives in South Asia, particularly the Belt One Road initiatives introduced by the Chinese government in 2013, and how these initiatives impact both the Maldives and China's economic growth.

Thakur, H. K. (2023) demonstrates how India managed its foreign policy challenges in the Maldives and the IOR. Historically, India focused its priority on continuing peaceful bonding with South Asia, but the contesting situations in the IOR have raised anxiety in India. After 2008, India faced a major foreign policy crisis with the Maldives, but during President Solih's regime in 2018, the bonding became stronger between India and the Maldives.

BRI Watch (2022) discussed how Belt and Road initiatives are another doorway for Sino-Maldives relations. China and the Maldives have started lots of projects like tourism, energy, marine cooperation, infrastructure, and socio-economic development. Both Sino-Maldives agreed to jointly promote the construction of the 21st century. This study focused on the “multidimensional relationship” between the Sino-Maldives.

Ashraf, J. (2017) demonstrates China's approach to foreign policy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. "Strategic Culture" represents the new paradigm for the 21st century in China. According to some researchers, including this author, the future of the 21st century hinges on who controls and dominates the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR). We can also forecast China's imminent rise to global prominence by adhering to "strategic culture" and collaborating with the Chinese "String of Pearls strategy." This strategy aims to enhance China's economic, military, diplomatic, and political ties within the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR). The question now arises: How does the "Pearls Theory" function? It involves strategically aligning these pearls to form a single string, which serves as an economic and military foundation within the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR). Each pearl here represents a sphere of "power" that China is attempting to secure along the IOR to achieve "Maritime Superiority," compete with other major powers, and prepare itself to become a "Global Super Power."

Sindhu, J.S., and Rogers, R.A. (2015) examine that in the last decade (2001–2012), the relationship between China and the Maldives has changed dramatically. Beginning with projects such as naval bases, infrastructural development, and bilateral trade, which have brought China and the Maldives closer and stronger, this paper argues that China's "String of Pearls" policy in the Indo-Pacific region (IOR) has created tension among the USA, India, and other superpower countries.

Bhatt, Dr. V. (2016) explains Geographically, China is interested in the Maldives' small state in the Indian Ocean. The author tried to focus on China's roles and engagement in the Maldives, as well as

why India is maintaining its trading business. This study argues that China wants to establish a submarine base facility in the Maldives to secure IORs. China always prioritizes national interests in its approach to the Maldives. Furthermore, China has implemented various aid and trade strategies, thereby increasing its dependence on the Maldives. Indeed, China has set its sights on the North Maldivian islands, specifically Ihavandhoo and Maarandhoo, as they are the closest to India. The vision encompasses the Indian Navy Ocean and its "String of Pearls" strategy, which refers to Chinese sea lines of communication. China is particularly concerned about the "String of Pearls," a strategy it deems suitable for the Maldives. As the Maldives has no self-owned navy, China is trying to set up "Chinese Naval Bases" in Marao. Trade and security issues undoubtedly contribute to the Maldives' dependence on India.

The review of existing literature, along with the plethora of books and studies, has revealed the existence of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and how China's strategy aids in protecting their national interests by maintaining strong bonds with the Maldives. Now we have tried to critically analyze the socio-economic and political ties between China and the Maldives.

Methodology

We primarily focused on secondary evidence in this study, examining the political and socio-economic ties between China and the Maldives using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Furthermore, we sourced research instruments from renowned research databases, such as the governmental news portal, and other documents to analyze the significance of Maldives-China relations.

The history of the 50-year friendship between China and the Maldives

Era of (618–1611 AD)

In ancient times, China and the Maldives sowed seeds of friendship. History from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) explores the presence of Maldivian delegations in China as early as 658 AD, carrying gifts from King Baladitiya to Emperor Kao-Tsung. The Maldives then referred to as "Mo-lai," served as a stopover for sailors traversing the Indian Ocean trade routes. Ancient Chinese travelers documented trade with the Maldives involving dried fish, coconuts, and cowry shells, used as currency until the 16th century.

Historical records show that Maldivian King Yusof sent an ambassador to Nanjing, then the capital of China, in 1417 AD, fostering diplomatic exchanges. During this period, it is believed that the King sent an envoy to China twice. Archaeological discoveries, such as 10th-century Chinese porcelain found in Malé and literary accounts like Francois Pyrard's writings from 1611, offer glimpses into material exchanges between the Maldives and China.

Diplomatic ties

The formalization of diplomatic ties between the Maldives and China on October 14, 1972, marks the beginning of a new chapter in bilateral relations. Since then, both nations have actively engaged in fostering strong bonds of friendship between the two countries. On August 20, 2007, the Maldives further solidified their friendship by opening an embassy in Beijing.

Mutual respect and support has been the cornerstone of Maldives-China relations. The Maldives has shown unwavering commitment to the one-China principle. The relationship advanced significantly in

September 2014 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Maldives on a state visit. This visit resulted in the establishment of a forward-looking and friendly partnership between the two countries.

China is the Maldives' largest trading partner and tourist market, as well as a generous partner who has helped the country develop over the past decade. The China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which opened in 2018, is a testament to this burgeoning relationship between the two countries and the effectiveness of the Belt and Road Initiative in fostering economic growth and connectivity. The completion of several thousand social housing units by Chinese companies and their assistance in enhancing infrastructure, including the upgrading of Velana International Airport, underscores the crucial role China plays in the development of the Maldives. There is no doubt that the time-tested relations between China and the Maldives will continue to strengthen in the years to come (Embassy of Maldives, 2024).

Some significant deals and 30th to 50th-anniversary celebrations

- a) *The 30th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations was celebrated in 2002:* Both the Maldives and China celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of their bilateral relations. During that time, both countries established official contact between the Chinese and Maldives armies. Seven years later, in 2009, the Maldives opened its embassy in Beijing.
- b) *The 40th anniversary of formal bilateral ties took place in 2012:* During this period, China established an embassy in the Maldives and simultaneously signed a military aid agreement with the Maldives (SY, 2016).
- c) *The 50th anniversary of the Golden Jubilee of Bilateral Relations is scheduled for 2022:* On their 50th anniversary, both countries aim to maintain bilateral relations in a broader field and a cooperative partnership for prosperity, happiness, and development. The two nations particularly highlight their political trust (Rehan, 2022).

A map illustrates the Maldives' geographic significance for India and China.

According to strategic thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan of the USA, "Whoever rules the waves rules the world." Alfred Thayer Mahan, a strategic thinker from the USA, also predicted that the International Ocean Rim (IOR) will become a crucial battleground in the coming days, as the IOR has become a significant factor in the competition for strategic control among developed and major powerful countries. Not only China, but India and the USA have also turned the Maldives into a geostrategic battleground. It is said that the Maldives got more focused after the Quad Alliance, led by Australia, Japan, and India (Gupta, 2020).

Map 1: Shows the Shipping lanes and Economic zone of Maldives:



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

Map 2: Shows the geographical and strategic importance of Maldives:



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

Map 3: String of Pearls: Source: Heritage Foundation Research



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

Map 4: Belt and Road Initiative:



Source: Heritage Foundation Research

Male, the capital of the Maldives, is critical for China, particularly for the international sea lanes that transport two-thirds of the world's oil and half of its container shipments, as well as the country's energy-driven economic growth (Ashok, 2018). For a clearer understanding, the above geographical maps from Nos. 1–4 illustrate the significance of the tiny Maldives in terms of border routes and waterways. China aims to achieve targets related to maritime trade, critical minerals, and military purposes.

Recent Foreign Policy Trends and the Political Phase of Maldives-China

Xi Jinping, the president of China's most powerful city, has described his foreign policy as "building a community of common destiny for humankind." The president of a large corporation governs his country by adhering to certain concepts, such as global "governance, peace and development, and reform and opening," which serve to strengthen China's ties with other nations (Mokry, 2024).

The Republic of the Maldives maintains diplomatic relations with 172 countries. The Maldives adheres to these principles in its foreign policy. There is sovereign equality of states, friendship with all countries, non-interference in international affairs, rule-based international order, and the supremacy of diplomacy.

The 2nd Republic of the Maldives' Presidents and their ideologies towards China and India are as follows:

Two factions, one leaning towards China and the other towards India, shape the internal political landscape of the Maldives.

Table 1: Regime of political ideology

Regime of	Their Political Ideology	Duration
President Maumoon Gayoom	Leaned on China/India (laid the foundation for contemporary Sino-Maldivian relation)	(1978-2008)
President Mohammed Nasheed	Leaned on India (The leader of Maldivian democratic party)	(2008-2012)
President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom	Leaned on China (The progressive party of Maldives)	(2013-2018)

President Ibrahim Mohammed Solih	Leaned on India (India first foreign policy)	(2018-2023)
President Muizzu	Leaned on China	(2023-today)

Source: Author's work

Table 1 explores the political dynamics of the Maldives. To foster positive relations between China and the Maldives, it is crucial to safeguard China's easy access to the Indian Ocean Rim and maintain sea lines of communication. As a result, China has maintained a strong relationship with the Maldives.

According to a Chinese research study, China's influence in the Maldives increased during 2013–2018. At that time, the Chinese government invested in major and large infrastructure projects. Over time, China's interest in the Maldives has grown significantly. At the same time, China has burdened the Maldives with a significant amount of debt for several infrastructure projects that it has funded and invested in.

Given that the political phases are heavily influenced by pro-China and pro-India sentiments, it is easy to assert that President Gayoom established the foundation for contemporary Maldives-Hina relations. President Gayoom's visits in 1984 and 2006, as the first male president, ushered in a new era of political development. During the second phase of political development, Mohammed Nasheed, the president of the Maldives and the leader of the MDP, shaped his policy by considering India as a role model, a strategy known as the "India first policy." Secondly, the Maldives depend on India for security, defense, economy, and development. The Maldives relied on India for security, defense, economy, and development.

Under Abdullah Yeameen's presidency from 2013 to 2018, the Maldives collaborated on joint (BRI) and mega projects. On the other hand, Solih's government focused on community development, mega-infrastructure projects, and defense cooperation. However, the Maldives faces some challenges under President Solih's and Nasheed's rule. Both Presidents Solih and Nasheed grapple with a range of issues, including the parliamentary system, the incapacity to combat corruption and issues related to electoral promises. Finally, these political developments will have a significant impact on China's position in the country (Shivamurthy, 2023)

According to Maldivian foreign policy principles, Mohamed Muizzu's "National Development Approach" will pave the way for more economic development in Male. This approach aims to keep a favorable balance with major powers. The newly elected president, Mohamed Muizzu, emphasized internal support for his country's success (Rasheed, 2024).

Aiming for a bright future for the Maldives, he is striving to establish new development theories that will contribute to the country's success, while also focusing on a foreign policy that favors China. As we are aware, the Maizuu government has denied any defense relationship with India. Furthermore, he went to Turkey instead of a traditional Indian visit.

Overall, the situation indicates that the Maldives' foreign policy is pragmatic (Rahman, 2024). Following the recent victory in the 2024 People's National Congress (PNC) election, it is clear to us that the Maldives government intends to work without any international force and unnecessary interventions, as well as uphold the Islamic faith compared to before (NDTV World, 2024). With China's spontaneous support, the beautiful, tourist-friendly Maldives is going to reorganize and recalculate its future development projects. To fulfill President Muizzu's promise, all Maldives

citizens dream of a Beijing-funded new island in Male, fish factories, and a new airport that will foster the driving force of the Maldives' economy. Furthermore, these initiatives will reduce the Maldives' dependence on India, as the Maldives' president and China have the same voice. And, according to the PND's outcome, it appears that both China and the Maldives are in a win-win situation (The Daily Star, 2024).

China-Maldives Economic Corporation profile analysis of the last few years

1. China and the Maldives engage in bilateral trade:

The Maldives' long-term developmental journey made it easy to form a mutual partnership with China. The president of the Maldives adopts the same tone as Ibrahim Mohammed Solih, stating, "China has walked with us hand in hand along our development journey." Given their shared goals and vision, they share the same commendable understanding as before (The President's Office, 2022).

In 2017, the Maldives and China held a bilateral consultation to enhance their cooperation. The collaboration on an international level is the 7th round of bilateral consultation. During this meeting, minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed Khaleel expressed gratitude to the Chinese government for their continuous support, especially during COVID-19. Some delegations from both countries discussed the upcoming project (Raajje TV, 2021).

In 2017, the China-Maldives Free Trade Agreement was approved by a Member of Parliament. However, following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, the global economic landscape underwent a drastic shift. China primarily exports high-end products such as electronic devices, mechanical goods, and ceramic tiles, while the Maldives primarily exports fish and fisheries.

Here are some statistical data:

Table 2: Bilateral Trade between China and the Maldives (Millions)

China Exports to Maldives	China Imports to Maldives	Year
190	0.161	2015
511	5.47	2018
273	5.32	2020
406	22.17	2021
451.29	60,000	2022

Source :(OEC, 2021) and Trade Economics, 2022)

Comparing the eight years of bilateral trade between the Maldives and China reveals the changes in trade value under the regimes of Abdul Yameen and Ibrahim Solih. Table 1 data indicates a rise in bilateral commerce between China and the Maldives starting in 2020. From only \$190 million in 2015 to \$511 million in 2018, Chinese exports grew. Nevertheless, there was a \$273 million drop in 2020 (OEC, 2021). Unexpectedly, Chinese exports were \$406 million in 2021 and \$451.29 million in 2022, according to current statistics (Trading Economics, 2022).

2. The core and subprojects between China and the Maldives:

At the bridge's opening ceremony, Yameen, the president of the Maldives, expressed gratitude for the Chinese government's assistance in realizing the dream of the Maldivian people (CNN, 2020).

- a) **China-Maldives Friendship Bridge:** The China-Maldives Friendship Bridge connects Male Island, Airport Island, and Hulhumalé Island. On August 30, 2018, the Maldivian people fulfilled their dream of a bridge by opening the 2-kilometre bridge to traffic. Over the past five years, the bridge has enabled over a billion people to travel, bringing transformative effects to the Maldivian people's development and daily lives.
- b) **Velana International Airport Expansion Project:** The project includes a new international terminal and an associated energy center with a total construction area of 78,000 square meters. Upon completion, it will significantly enhance the airport's passenger reception capacity, stimulate the development of the Maldivian tourism industry, and create tens of thousands of job opportunities.
- c) **Hotel Riu Palace, Maldives:** The Hotel Riu Palace Maldives is a four-star hotel with a modern and Italian-inspired design. Completed in March 2019, the hotel consists of approximately 420 rooms, an 8,000-square-meter logistics area, and the development of green spaces, water supply, and power facilities on the entire hotel island.
- d) **Irufen Island Resort:** The Irufen Island Resort is a four-star hotel located on Dhigurah Island, approximately 170 kilometers from Male. With a total construction area of 72,000 square meters, the hotel features 14 different types of rooms, totaling 496 rooms.
- e) **Laamu Link Road Project:** The Laamu Link Road Project has a total length of 16.5 kilometers, connecting four adjacent islands with a two-lane road. The project fulfills the long-standing dream of the people in the atoll, making their lives more convenient and promoting regional economic and social development (CCCC, 2024).

China and the Maldives recently reached an agreement for 2024

Both governments have signed the Action Plan for Establishing a China-Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2024-2028) and agreements on collaboration in fields such as digital economy, the BRI, blue economy, infrastructure building, green development, and support for citizens' standard of living (Hindustan Time, 2024). Muizzu and Xi inked twenty important agreements across a variety of strategic and economic domains. Additionally, Muizzu and Xi announced the upgrade of their bilateral relations to a high-level strategic cooperative partnership. The Memorandum was specifically signed in the areas of Fisheries, Blue Economy Cooperation, Tourism, Disaster Risk Reduction, Housing, Agriculture, Digital Economy, Education, Green Energy, and Human Resource Development (The President's Office, 2024).

Mega Projects: At a Glance

There is an action plan (2024–2028), the GDI, GCI, and GSI development strategies serve as global initiatives for development, global civilization, and global security. Mutual trust and assistance, Common development and prosperity, win-win cooperation, mutual benefit and friendly interactions between governments, In exchange for experience in governance, China supports the Maldives' national sovereignty, independence, and dignity. The Maldives places a high premium on the One China 2030 strategy for environmentally friendly and sustainable development

The foreign affairs ministers of both China and the Maldives held an extensive bilateral discussion in Beijing during a recent visit in July 2024. The discussions covered a significant topic, which will make Sino-Maldives relations even stronger. The meeting also concluded with both parties reiterating their commitment to exploring new avenues for cooperation to solidify political and economic cooperation between the Maldives and China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

3. Tourism Cooperation:

Having stunning scenery, incredible landscape, luxury accommodation, unique culture, direct flights, visa facility schedules, and positive recommendations, makes the Maldives more appealing to Chinese people. Regarding this, the China Tourism Bureau stated that “the Maldives has become one of the most desired destinations for Chinese tourists (Chinese Tourist Agency, 2023).

The top five international vacation destinations include the Maldives. Already, the Maldives won the hearts of Chinese people with its serene 1000 islands in the Indian Ocean (Verot, 2023).

Undoubtedly, China-Maldives tourism cooperation is vital for both countries. According to previous history, China became the Maldives' No. 1 market in 2010 and maintained its lead until the pandemic.

In 2018, the Maldives hosted a forum on China-Maldives tourism cooperation, where the China Association of Travel Services and the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry signed an MOU to strengthen tourism ties and development (Tourism News Live, 2018). The Maldives has attracted over 700,000 tourists so far in 2023, according to data from the Ministry of Tourism, which increased by 17.5% compared to the previous year of 2022 (Ibrahim, 2023). The managing director of Maldives Marketing and Republic Relation Corporation said, “We are extremely pleased to be welcoming flights from China to the Maldives again. China was our key source of market for some years before the onset of the pandemic, and we are looking forward to Chinese travelers topping our arrival charts again” (Global Times, 2023).

Since the beginning of 2023, the statistics show that the Maldives has welcomed 2,239 tourists from China within four days. The good news is that China now ranks 9th out of 10th in the Maldives' tourism market.

Figure 1: Ratio of Indian and Chinese tourists to Maldives in 2022

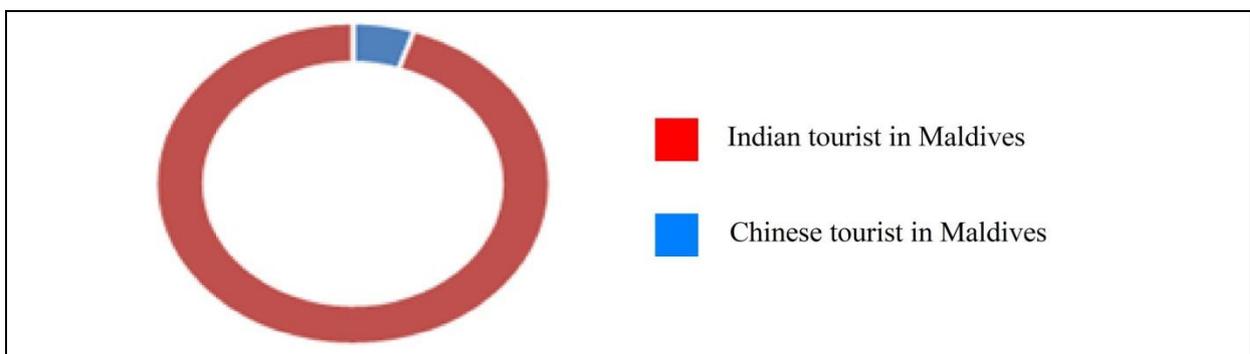
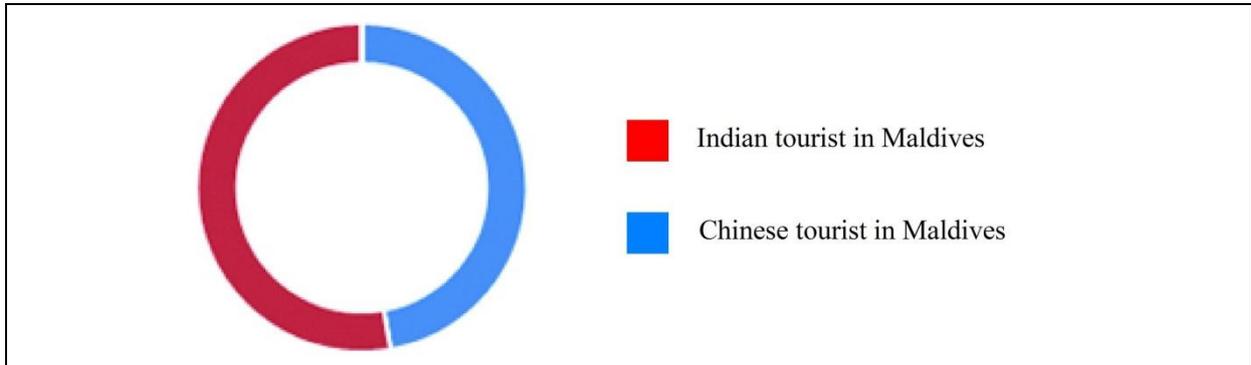


Figure 2: Ratio of Indian and Chinese tourists to Maldives in 2023



Here, figures 1 and 2 indicate the comparison of the tourist ratio of Maldives and India. Due to COVID-19, the Maldives has faced dramatic changes in the tourist sector. However, in 2023, the Chinese tourist ratio to the Maldives will be higher than in 2022. As a result, the Indian tourist ratio to the Maldives is higher in 2023 than in 2022 (Udhma, 2023).

4. China provides support for climate change, waste management, and the maritime economy

The beautiful island of the Maldives generated 86 metric tons of waste, mainly plastic, daily. Although the Maldives government has already adopted the “Use and Dispose” system, micro plastics are still harmful to coral reefs and the maritime economy. As a result, sustainable waste management is required to turn waste into wealth (World Bank Group, 2022). China is also a supporter of this initiative. The State Construction and Engineering Commission (CSCEC) will complete the waste transfer station project by 2022 (Sun Siyam Media, 2021). History indicates that in the past, China donated approximately 200 trash cans valued at \$500,000 to the Maldives as a gesture towards environmental conservation. As we know, China and the Maldives have been maintaining the “BRI International Green Development Coalition” (BRI Watch, 2022). Recently, China constructed a “waste transfer station” in the Maldives, which is helping “Male” with cleanliness as well as creating the greatest opportunity for proper waste usage to generate electricity in the Maldives (China State Construction, 2024).

5. During the pandemic, China provided medical aid the pandemic

China's support during the pandemic is unavoidable, as it relies on mutual friendship. To combat COVID-19, the Maldives needs a significant quantity of medical supplies, including protective masks, ventilators, sampling sticks, and medical protective suits (Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Chinese construction company Shanghai Construction Group (SCG) sent 20,000 medical supplies, 10,000 pairs of gloves, and 500 personal protective equipment (PPE) kits to Maldives rescue personnel (Shaahunaz, 2020). President Xi Jinping's promises to continue China's assistance in combating COVID-19 have strengthened the partnership between China and the Maldives (PSM News, 2022). The China-Maldives “Ophthalmology Centre Assistance and Cooperation Program” recently kicked off, benefiting local patients, doctors, and nurses in ophthalmology and ensuring accurate diagnosis and treatment of common ophthalmic diseases (Zhongshan Ophthalmic Centre, 2023)

6. Cultural bonding and educational agreements

To strengthen the bilateral relationship, both China and the Maldives aim to enhance cultural practice and the quality of education. The education agreement helps foster a greater understanding of culture

through academic programs and research activities. Furthermore, it establishes a hub for intellectual development in the academic institutions of both China and Malaysia. The sports agreements facilitate athletic exchange, with a primary focus on health awareness (Ahmed, 2023). The China-Maldivian Cultural Association (CMCA) is exchanging programs and scholarship opportunities for youth in the Maldives. Each year, CMCA offers at least three students a scholarship from Chinese universities (Zunaam, 2021).

7. Agricultural Support

In 2012, some technicians from the Maldives' Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture visited China to learn about the technology of bio-controlling coconut pests. In 2013, the Maldives received a substantial shipment of pesticides, parasitoids, and artificial climate boxes from China (Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In 2014, China provided a cash grant of 1 million RMB to support the agricultural diversification of the Maldives (Global Times, 2014). China provided training and assistance for pest management, and the Maldives minister expressed appreciation for them. In 2022, China exported agricultural products for soil preparation to the Maldives for US\$ 14.47 thousand (Trading Economics, 2024).

8. Micro-Grid seawater desalination project

The people of the Maldives are suffering through a water crisis, and as a neighboring friendly nation, China is sympathetic and will provide all humanitarian aid it can, according to "Hong Lei," a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry (Yunbi, 2014). China offered a USD 500,000 emergency grant in 2014 to restore the uninterrupted water supply in local regions (Xinhua, 2014). The China-Aid-Micro-Grid sea-water desalination project entered into an exchange of letters between the Maldives and China in 2017. Since the equipment saves and recycles energy, it significantly reduces the overall cost of saltwater desalination. In light of this, the Chinese ambassador agreed to establish micro-grid seawater desalination plant facilities that will benefit the Maldivians (PSM News, 2024). FHNEP initiated the equipment installation on the first island, Lh. Olhuvelifushi, in April 2022, which will supply 700 residents with clean, fresh water and renewable electricity. The Maldives anticipates equipping an additional four islands to alleviate the issue of water scarcity.

9. Defense Cooperation

Since the beginning of their friendship, China has provided the Maldives with both urban and economic assistance. For the first time, to strengthen bilateral ties, the Maldives and China have signed a "Defense Cooperation" agreement, under which China will provide free military support in the form of non-lethal equipment and training from its military, thereby enhancing the technical capabilities of the Maldives' defense forces. The current government of the Maldives is trying to reduce its dependency on India. President Muizzu declared that Indian military personnel must leave the Maldives as soon as possible (The Economic Times, 2024).

10. DSR and China's Global Tech Expansion

In 2023, China's software and IT services business generated around 1.73 trillion dollars for commercial purposes. China is becoming the next superpower. Recently, China's tech landscape has been growing rapidly, with high-tech leaders aiming to strengthen its industrial capacity while minimizing its dependency on foreign technologies. Digital Silk Road has a few major components, including underwater cables and hi-tech closed-circuit television. The DSR has extended China's bilateral digital cooperation around the world. China has signed up for digital projects in

approximately 24 countries. Over the last six years, Chinese firms have invested close to \$23 billion. The Maldives is one of the smaller ones. In 2012, the Maldives National Centre of Information Technology and Huawei Technologies' Sri Lankan subsidiary signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to enhance the Maldives' IT infrastructure as part of the SMART Maldives initiative. The Maldives is also involved in an underwater cable project under the China Construction Bank, China-Asian Info Harbo Company, and Tropic Science Company. Dahua and Hikvision are the world's two leading CCTV companies. National authorities in the Maldives have installed a total of 861 CCTV cameras (Dahua-713 and Hikvision-148). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific region has the potential to expand tech connectivity in developing economies (Patil and Gupta, 2024). The World Bank Group and the Ministry of Economic Development recently held a roundtable meeting to discuss strategies for leveraging digital technologies to promote green, resilient, and inclusive growth, aiming to surpass current digital tools and innovations (World Bank Group, 2022).

11. The Maldives and China are cooperating on power and energy matters

The Maldives signed a new BESS battery energy storage system project spanning 24 islands. A joint venture secured the project. The energy storage system aims to enhance the islands' high renewable energy penetration and grids' ability to store excess electricity (PSM News, 2023). In 2024, the Maldives government and a Chinese company signed an agreement to install solar panels on many islands to generate power. The agreement is for 30 island-based solar arrays with a combined 5,88 MW and 4,45 MW of battery storage (PSM News, 2024).

12. Debt traps

The Maldives had a major economic crisis due to COVID-19 before the epidemic. The Maldives received \$3 billion from China. Another historical account suggests that most South Asian countries rely on China to manage their debt crises. Recently, the Maldives' dependency on China has become a major concern. China's strategic interests and geopolitical influence primarily affect the Maldives and South Asia. Still, this situation also calls into question the sovereignty of the South Asian region over the Indian Ocean. China's debt trap enslaves approximately 97 countries worldwide. Moreover, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh are from South Asia (BRI Watch, 2022). The IMF has expressed concern about the Maldives' economy, noting that if the current policy remains unchanged and the excessive debt and fiscal deficit continue to rise, the Maldives could face significant external and overall debt distress. The newly elected president announced that “to start all the developmental projects is not possible in an ongoing situation; rather, we can focus on the core project to earn income (The Hindu, 2024).

Dreaming of long-term friendships between China and the Maldives

a) Sino-Maldives regional affairs

In the international arena, China-Maldives has become a role model for its “win-win” cooperation with adjuvant policies and systems. Both countries are adhering to strategic guidelines for a shared vision, as evidenced by the gradual visits by officials to each other's locations. Both believe in close communication and coordination to establish peace and sustainable global development. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a Eurasian, socio-economic, and political security and defense organization aiming to confront threats from terrorism, extremism, and separatism. And the Maldives is a dialogue partner in practicing multilateralism. Chinese officials have stated that they will persist in providing support to the Maldives to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, in line

with the principles of foreign policy. Both parties should prioritize their focus on BRI projects and major projects. Sino-Male needs to take on more projects in the marine sector, free trade agreements, and data science fields.

b) Balancing is a must for Maldives, China, and India-Triangle relations

As China prioritizes its presence in the Indian Ocean, particularly the Maldives, the question arises: what about India? Despite the bleak outlook for India-Maldives relations, India should remain a pessimistic supporter of the Maldives.

China's position is to follow the UN Charter and refrain from interfering in the Maldives' domestic affairs. In response to this issue, China has expressed its willingness to be flexible and support the Maldives in maintaining their independence and sovereignty. Major, powerful countries often overlook the small Maldives' limited resources. Both China and India rank at the top of the investment list because of the Maldives' strategic location. In the recent past, during COVID-19, India gave \$250 million in economic support to the Maldives. Despite the recent changes in the Maldives' government, India must continue to assert itself in its developmental activities there. The 2023 Maldives election paints a bleak picture of the relationship between the Maldives and India. Experts say that it is a result of Indian troops withdrawing by March 15, 2024. In contrast, the relationship between China and the Maldives is gradually improving thanks to the maintenance of a "comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership." The future of India-Maldives relations appears to be negatively correlated with the Maldives' ties to China. The think tank interpreted the 2023 Maldives election as a contest between India and China. Although the Maldives' geopolitical situation primarily revolves around the "pro-China/India-out" and "pro-India/China-out" concepts, it appears that the current president of the Maldives plans to lessen the country's reliance on India. But the Maldives' ruling party should be concerned about their commitment to the country's future.

Undoubtedly, India is greatly concerned about the deep connection between China and the Maldives. This could potentially diminish India's dominance and connectivity within the Indian Ocean region. According to the parliament rules, if any foreign countries or China want to buy land by maintaining parliament policy, then automatically the geostrategic importance becomes weak in the Maldives, especially the Indian army.

The outcome of Sino-Maldives relations indicates that China will find it easy to import oil and petroleum from Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, while India will find it challenging to trade with African countries. India could easily establish a cautious partnership with the Maldives. Furthermore, experts predict that India will not cede the location to China. The UN organization (UNDP) of the Maldives supported the Maldives during the unfavorable impacts of the pandemic with the full support of the People's Republic of China.

According to the Indian media, Foreign Minister S. Jaisankar visited Male on August 9–11. During his visit, he assured that the Maldives continues to be an important partner of India, maintaining peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indian Ocean Region. He also emphasized multi-dimensional bilateral relationships.

c) Maldivian young towards China

In the Maldives, nearly 40% of the population is young. According to a study by USAID, 94% of the youth in the Maldives believe that they should participate in politics. The UN Maldives Youth Strategy asserts that young people should participate in leadership, public engagement, and decision-

making for the betterment of their future. To realize their aspirations, it is crucial to highlight and actively listen to future leaders. Recent data shows Maldivian youth are receiving warm hospitality from the Chinese government, which will motivate them to extend Sino-Male ties. Already, 200 Maldivian youth are getting fully funded scholarships from the Chinese government. To expand the people-to-people and cultural exchanges, both countries should work more so people can understand each other's norms and values. Some Chinese language institutions are going to open, which will help Maldivian youths learn more about China (UNDCO, 2023).

There are areas of concern for both China and Maldives

- ❖ Both should carefully pursue several areas of concern for regional interest and development. China must uphold regional governance, primarily focusing on infrastructure development, bilateral trade, and the tourism sector in the tiny Maldives.
- ❖ Both are creating coordinated, effective action for stable political and economic relations.
- ❖ Considering global interest, China, India, and the Maldives should focus more on a "win-win" situation rather than a "win-lose" situation through effective cooperation, constant dialogue, and gradual visits of officials and government.
- ❖ The Maldives must focus on China's strategic diplomacy regarding aid and trade. Excessive reliance on China could potentially be the cause of the debt trap.
- ❖ The Maldives should also be aware of China and other powerful countries' "geopolitical" games and "secret military projects."
- ❖ Because IOR has huge potential for both the Maldives and China, they should protect "coastal natural habitats," the blue economy, and fisheries and reduce marine pollution.
- ❖ Both must observe and monitor IOR's counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, and trafficking issues.
- ❖ Furthermore, the Maldives need to be capable of protecting the safety of Chinese personnel and organizations stationed there.

Conclusion

The bilateral relationship between China and the Maldives offers a unique chance to both extend the achievements of the past and actively move ahead to the future. Two Asian giants are inundating the island nation with construction projects. China is not the only one seeking friendship with the small, tourism-dependent country. The Maldives location is a strategic priority for both of Asia's superpowers. On the other hand, India's current policy towards the Maldives is robust. First and foremost, there is no interference in a country's internal affairs. Secondly, mutual respect in foreign affairs is essential. Chinese involvement is primarily economic, whereas Indian involvement is more emotional. India was the first country to set up a permanent embassy in Male, although it wasn't the first to recognize the Maldives when they gained independence in 1965. The strategic location, security, and military industries of the Maldives are all to India's advantage, and the fact that the two countries share culture, language, economics, and religion only adds to the list of advantages. Nonetheless, India does choose some tourist spots for medical, business-related trips, and educational. The struggle for infrastructure is another sign of the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between India and China over the Maldives. The above study reveals that the Maldives' diplomatic ties with China have

transformed due to shared ideas about mutual gain and developmental activities. The Maldives also like China's mutual respect policy and believe it has room to expand politically and economically in the future. China's previous regional projects in the Maldives have generated significant public demand and policy interest in maximizing Chinese cooperation. China's initiatives and developmental engagement faced political controversy. However, China and the Maldives improved their relationship in 2023, following the recent presidential election. Chinese President Xi Jinping referred to Muizzu as "an old friend". The current president, Muizzu, appreciates both India and China for helping strengthen the Maldives' fragile economy. Therefore, we can assert that China and the Maldives maintain "consensual ties" rather than "coercive ties," and these strategies will enhance the country's interests.

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