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Constructing State Identity and Changing Foreign Policy of the Maldives Toward India

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ABSTRACT

How does one explain the foreign policy behavior of South Asia's small states? The conventional scholarship drawing from structural realism argues that the presence of China allows them to balance India, leading to a deterioration of their ties with India. This paper argues that the realist explanation overdetermines the role of China in explaining foreign policy change. Taking a case of India-Maldives relations, this paper argues that the changes in Maldives' foreign policy are rooted in contested ideas about Maldivian state identity. It argues that the foreign policy choices of successive Maldivian governments in the post-2008 period are rooted in the contested meanings of sovereignty and state-building processes. Second, focusing on how Maldivian political elites construct preferences, this paper moves away from the Indo-centric explanation of South Asian international politics by showing contrary to realist predispositions, small states exercise agency in actively fashioning their choices in the complex geopolitical environment.

Introduction

How does one explain the foreign and security policy of small states? The conventional scholarship dominated by the realist tradition argues that small states are ineffectual in the international system due to the lack of material capabilities, and their behavior can be explained primarily by structural factors. They argue that small states either balance or bandwagon in the international system for their survival. However, realist scholarship is found wanting when small states do not employ balancing or bandwagoning strategies and retain their strategic autonomy.¹ Specifically, what factors explain the foreign policy preferences of South Asia's small states, which engage both with India and China without resorting to balancing or bandwagoning strategies?

To understand the behavior of small states, this paper looks at the divergences in the foreign policy preferences of Maldives under two successive governments led by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), respectively. The puzzle in the India-Maldives relationship stems from the fact that both the MDP and PPM

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governments during their respective tenure professed “India first policy,” yet during the PPM’s period, the relations between India and Maldives struck rock bottom. During the second MDP government under Ibrahim Solih, when the relation recalibrated, the opposition led by PPM began an “India Out” campaign. Therefore, the question arises: what factors explain the positioning of the two main political parties toward India and their foreign policy strategy?

The mainstream discourse explaining India-Maldives relations hinges on the neo-realist explanations, arguing that China’s foray into South Asia has led small states to balance against India.² In contrast, others have argued that Maldives is neither bandwagoning nor balancing but pursuing hedging strategies to derive economic and security benefits amid the competition between India and China.³ The managed rivalry and economic interdependence between India and China have allowed the small states to engage in complex bargaining processes without explicitly engaging in balancing or bandwagoning.⁴ Both these explanations rely on structural determinants in which the role of China and its interactions with India looms large, however, they fail to explain the divergences in preferences of MDP and PPM governments concerning balancing and hedging strategies.

A second set of explanations focuses on the style of individual leadership and posits some leaders as pro-India and others as anti-India. In recent years, with the Chinese forays into South Asia, the debate has been on whether a particular leader is pro-India or pro-China.⁵ Such binaries are not only teleological but also limit the capacity to explain the foreign policy practices and preferences arising from geopolitical and domestic factors. In Maldives, the MDP is seen as pro-India, whereas the PPM is seen as pro-China. Even if we accept these as role changes, one needs to configure how leaders continue, modify or change their existing roles in the international system.⁶

Another set of scholarship looks at changes in domestic politics to explain the shift in foreign policy preferences.⁷ While arguing that the democratic transition has created space for political competition that has also split into external relations, it does not interrogate the question of why the preferences of parties are shaped the way they are. Though it brings out the nuances of domestic politics, it fails to explain the construction and contestation in the formation of preferences by state agents and how it guides their policymaking.⁸ The change in governments does not necessarily demand change in foreign policy. Sometimes governments continue with the policies of their predecessors, and other times modify or change them. Domestic transition does not explain under what conditions shifts in foreign policy occur.

In explaining divergence in the India-Maldives relations, the above scholarship points to structural factors or Yameen’s pro-China inclinations. Two issues, however, emerge from this observation. First, during Yameen’s presidency, India-Maldives signed a defense agreement and in

the same period, he refused to renew the extension of Indian military helicopters. A simplistic reading of Yameen's foreign policy as pro-China either due to structural factors or personal inclinations cannot explain this contradiction. It raises the question of why Maldives would sign a Defense agreement with India if it were balancing India through China.

As noted above, the limitations of both structural and domestic approaches in explaining Maldives' foreign policy changes and behavior, this article argues that a better explanation of state behavior is found in understanding the process of identity construction and preference formation by the state agents as they navigate complex geopolitics and domestic politics. In this paper, I show that the change and continuity in the foreign policy of Maldives under the two successive governments occurred due to the different meanings of sovereignty and state-building processes that informed their worldview and role conception of India within that social reality. The "India Out" campaign and "India First" policy are also symptomatic of these worldviews.

By explaining the foreign policy preferences of Maldives through state identity, this paper contributes to the emerging literature on small states that contests the dominant realist perspective and points to the importance of linking systemic and domestic politics in accounting for their behavior. Secondly, by understanding how Maldivian state elites understand the region and the world, this paper also attempts to move away from the Indo-centric understanding of South Asia and points to the agency of small states in navigating the complex geopolitics of the region. Third, by locating leadership-driven change in foreign policy, it contests the claim that small states only react to systemic pressure. By locating these changes within the domain of changing state identity, the article argues that not only do small states exercise agency in making foreign and security politics but their domestic politics is anything but consensual. Fourth, by taking Maldives as a case study, this article addresses a gap highlighted by Ganguly and Pardesi, who point out that, so far, "very few South Asian case materials have been effectively integrated into the mainstream of the foreign and security policy literature [and] only a very small number of scholars have devoted significant effort in drawing on [the] substantial body of evidence from the region."⁹

This paper follows discourse analysis to articulate Maldivian state identity and foreign policy roles by focusing on the speeches of state elites, especially the President, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister. Due to limitations of language and the Maldives' nascent media industry that does not produce commentary on the state's daily affairs, a thick description of identity remains wanting, and we are forced to rely on only speeches and official documents. With these limitations, I follow Holsti's precedent in which leaders' speeches are empirical sources for the role states play in the international system.¹⁰ This does not mean that leaders are the only actors constructing identity and

identifying subsequent roles and are not contested and constrained by domestic and systemic structures, but their articulation reflects the collective ideas of the political elites having the authority and legitimacy to make foreign policy.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: First, I draw linkages between small states, state identity and foreign policy, and argue that realist reading of international affairs strips agency from small states, and therefore, state identity provides a way forward to bring back the agency of small states in explaining their policy choices. Second, I introduce the ideas articulated by Nasheed and Yameen in constructing state identity and foreign policy roles. Third, I look at the India-Maldives relations during their tenure, arguing how and why the change in understanding of the state-building project shifted the foreign policy role that Maldives envisaged vis-à-vis India. Finally, I conclude by arguing that different ideas about state identity led to a distinctive foreign policy for successive Maldives governments. Further, the less institutionalized nature of the state allowed the change to occur smoothly without much resistance. However, the ideas of state-building remain firmly contested and will continue to impact domestic politics and its relations with India.

Small states, identity and foreign policy

In the conventional international relations scholarship, small states are considered inconsequential actors in the international system. The importance of material capabilities in the conventional scholarships to account for state behavior reduces the properties of “smallness” to vulnerability and weakness. Keohane defines small states as those whose leaders either alone or in a small group cannot make a significant impact on the system.¹¹ They are seen as lacking sufficient capacities to maintain their security and therefore need the aid of other states and institutions.¹² The size of the states bundled with their relative resource capabilities are the markers of small state typology, however, the prior assumption that they are insignificant in the international system, is to regard smallness as lacking “agency.”

The core ontological assumptions of the realist theory- anarchy, functionally alike, and security seeking- do not allow them to differentiate between small states and major powers. They argue that systemic factors and relative material capabilities can explain small states’ behavior. Since the security dilemma for them is acute and international pressure outweighs the domestic ones, it is inconsequential to look at the domestic factors to explain their foreign and security policies.¹³

This results in realists arguing that small states have limited choices for survival in the international system by aligning with major powers that provide them with security guarantees from their insecurities. However, realists are divided on whether balancing or bandwagoning is the more efficient strategy. Waltz argues that small states are likely to balance the

great power by allying with the weaker power.¹⁴ On the contrary, Walt contends that they are likely to bandwagon to avoid immediate attack from the dominant power.¹⁵ Eric Labs points out that the choice of an alliance is determined by geographic proximity and availability of alliance options.¹⁶ He contends that weak states tend to balance if a great power ally is present against the great power threat.¹⁷ In a major power competition, balancing and bandwagoning frameworks provide indeterminate explanations since bandwagoning with one power automatically translates into balancing the other power.

This conventional view that all states are alike with homogenous interests is insufficient to explain the behavior of small states. In realist reading, a small state remains an anxious state that constantly needs to look over its shoulders for survival. It strips agency from the small states, asserting that they have to follow the dictates of great power and have choices only as much as to which alliances to join. These explanations tend to overdetermine the systemic factors and undermine the domestic factors. Disregarding domestic variables, structural realists cannot explain why one great power is treated as an ally and another as an enemy or rival. Nor can they explain how domestic factors affect the forming of preferences and alliance choices for small states.

Contrary to the structural realists' explanations, scholars have pointed out the uniqueness of small states in international relations and the importance of domestic politics in explaining their foreign policy and security choices. The proliferation of scholarship focussing on small states has contested the claims that states have homogenous interests and are functionally alike by distinguishing small states from major powers.¹⁸ While scholarship on small states has persuasively shown diverse strategies these actors pursue, from hedging to shelter-seeking and status-seeking, this scholarship is still limited with its ontological assumptions similar to structural realists. The explanation for foreign and security policy is still influenced by external factors and realist assumptions of relative power capabilities.¹⁹ As Hey notes in the literature survey on small states, "If there is one piece of conventional wisdom about how to best explain small state behaviour, it is that the answer lies at the system level of analysis."²⁰

Similarly, scholars have demonstrated the importance of internal security considerations,²¹ status and prestige in factoring alliance choices.²² To remedy the structural realists' arguments, neo-classical realists, while adhering to the realist systemic assumptions, introduce intervening variables, such as perception, domestic politics, and images, at the unit level to explain the anomalies in state behavior that could not be explained as predicted by the realist theory.²³ They have shown that domestic politics is an important element in the foreign policy of small states, such as elite calculation²⁴ and liberal-egalitarian values.²⁵ However, even though neo-classical realists examine the unit-level variables to explain foreign and security policy, they still share the assumptions of structural realism, anarchy and security-seeking

behavior that guide their research objectives. Therefore, unit-level and ideational variables only act as intervening variables rather than primary factors. Since what factor “causes” remains an empirical phenomenon, neo-classical realists, by design, relegate ideational factors to secondary variables, making a methodological error. Contrary to this, Benjamin Muller has demonstrated that under certain conditions, systemic variables are intervening while unit and regional variables are primary “causes.”²⁶ Second, neo-classical realism is inconsistent in explaining the changes in the state’s foreign policy. Relying on structuralist realist assumptions, only systemic change can lead states to reorient their behavior, however, neo-classical realism needs to suspend this assumption to explain changes in the state’s behavior that occur due to factors other than systemic changes. Finally, neo-classical realism separates international and domestic variables to provide causative relations; however, domestic interests are conditioned by the international environment and vice-versa.²⁷

Therefore, to understand and explain the foreign and security policy of states and the changes and continuity within them, one needs to understand how both domestic and systemic variables influence each other and what factor guides those foreign policy choices. To understand policy choice and preference formation, we need to suspend the ahistorical view that all states may undertake similar strategies in similar situations. Rather, we need to interrogate how ideas and material resources interact to produce policy choices and why these policy choices change.

The central argument in this article is that changes in state identity lead to foreign policy changes. Scholarships on constructivism have highlighted the roles of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping systemic structures and individual behavior.²⁸ Focussing on the mutually constitutive nature of structures and agents, they have also shown that systemic and unit-level variables interact and cannot be priori decided what “caused” a certain behavior.²⁹ The argument from these assumptions follows that systemic and domestic factors are entangled and reinforce each other. How the states respond to them depends on the dominant ideas and identities valued by the policymakers. Like realists and unlike scholars of small-state literature, constructivists do not differentiate between small-state and major powers. However, their ontological standpoint allows for attributing different interests to similarly located states. Hence, while realists argue that states are functionally undifferentiated, scholars on small states distinguish between small and large states and make the similar fallacy of attributing similar interests to small states. For constructivists, states are functionally differentiated based on their historical and social context that informs their identity construction and preference formation.

State identity remains an important conceptual tool in explaining the formation of preferences and state behavior. Identity is defined as the “images of individuality and distinctiveness (selfhood)” held and projected by an actor

and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant others.³⁰ It refers to worldviews, roles, and practices of agents generated by defining themselves and others through the inter-subjective systemic and domestic structures. Broadly conceived, identities are relational and processual and embody the nature of self-other relationships.³¹ It is formed through an ongoing process of interaction and social learning.³² They are conceptualized or articulated in relation to other identities, something that it is not. While difference is intrinsic to the constitution of identity, it does not necessarily lead to otherness. Differences can either lead to negative or positive identification.³³ As Lene Hansen notes, identity does not need to be constructed through the juxtaposition of radically different or threatening Other but can take on different degrees of “Otherness.”³⁴

According to Hopf, identities perform three functions: they tell you who you are and others are; they imply a particular set of interests or preferences concerning choices of action in a particular domain and concerning particular actors.³⁵ In specifying a self-ascription role based on material and systemic reality, identities generate and shape interests specifying appropriate behavior for a particular representation of self by making some actions legitimate and intelligible and others not.³⁶

If identities are central to state behavior, we need to answer where they emerge from, how they change, and how that change affects foreign policy orientations. Identities are constituted by both domestic and systemic structures and constructed by authoritative political elites in their interactions with international and domestic society. Kowert and Legro point to three sources of identity constitution: internal, referring to domestic politics and individual and collective attributes of political elites; social interaction, referring to the interaction of states among themselves and other actors; and ecological environment that includes institutional norms and cultural practices at the systemic levels.³⁷ Gurowitz notes that state identity refers to the ideas about the nature and purpose of a particular system of rule that is deeply embedded in enduring state structures such as legal frameworks, constitutions, administrative apparatuses and ideological frameworks.³⁸ These ideas and structures are not over the people’s heads but are constructed by the agents and, hence, of which state agents – the government actors have the most authoritative power and legitimacy to define the rules and construct state identity. Hence, agents remain central to constructing the state identity but they are constrained by both domestic and systemic structures. This also suggests that identities are neither static nor rigid but are flexible, multiple, layered and contestable by other political elites.³⁹ These discursive changes in the ideas of state identity can occur at both systemic levels and domestic politics. These are however, not mutually exclusive domains. The debate in domestic politics on the role of the state can effectively change the way it practices its foreign policy. Zehfuss has persuasively shown the process of emergence and disappearance of identity in

the transformation of German identity, from opposition to military involvement abroad to accepting it, which requires understanding the discursive construction of identity and articulation that took place at the domestic level.⁴⁰

Since identities provide state actors with values, roles, interests and legitimizing reasons to achieve their goals, they shape their policy preferences and foreign policies. The social origin of foreign policy is located within the construction, articulation and (re)production of identity.⁴¹ Through foreign policy, states seek to 'ascribe meaning to a situation and in doing so, they articulate specific identities of other states, regions, peoples, and institutions as well as the identity of the national, regional or institutional self.⁴² Foregrounding identity-based explanations of foreign policy actions allows us to respond to the question of the origin of preferences and particular roles adopted by the states. Roles are the representation of state identity, interests and foreign policy, and as an analytical device, they give identity context-based action.⁴³ Locating identity at a particular time and space allows us to focus on the roles that states construct for themselves and practice in the international system when interacting with other states. Within constructivism, roles are particular manifestations of identity in practice at a distinct time and space and for a particular issue.

Centering the roles of small states in explaining their foreign and security policy serves three purposes: first, it provides agency to the small state actors, which the traditional theories deny; second, it postulates roles beyond that of balancer and shelter seeker; third, it also allows us to locate sources of foreign policy change within the small states.

If the proposition that identity shapes and generates preferences is correct, then changes in identity should also explain changes in the goal, policy actions or means of achieving them. A role is a particular manifestation of identity and interests and therefore, we will here focus on how changes in the role produces variation in foreign policy. A role change can lead to changes in the ways agents define their preferences to achieve their objectives.⁴⁴ Though foreign policy changes are rare,⁴⁵ much of the literature attributes these to systemic changes, exogenous shocks and crises, domestic politics and public opinion. Though these exogenous events are necessary conditions to reevaluate policies, they remain insufficient to trigger or explain changes.⁴⁶ Others have looked at agent-based sources of change, such as leadership-driven and bureaucratic advocacy.⁴⁷

These are the drivers of change, but we cannot still explain when and why such changes occur. Hermann remarks that foreign policy change is a spectrum that can range from adjustment change, program change, goal change and international orientation change.⁴⁸ While the adjustment changes do not require any role change, program changes require a slight modification in role and goal, and reorientation would require a complete role change. Exogenous shocks and domestic restructuring, however, may not lead to

changes in policy and states continuing with their existing roles, showing either policy continuity or stasis.

When does role change take place? Since identities are constructed by agents, they are amenable to change either through self-reflection or contestation by domestic or systemic actors.⁴⁹ The changes in role and foreign policy through self-reflection can subsequently occur if the state actors realize that expected outcomes or the benefits from the policy are not being realized and there are available alternatives to change the current course of actions.⁵⁰ Since identities are not static but flexible and contestable, changes can also occur if old orthodoxy is replaced by new sets of elites that may redefine the initial problem and modify the objectives or means of achieving them.⁵¹ This may not require an understanding that the current policy is failing, a successful policy can also be challenged because the new ideas introduced by policy entrepreneurs change the paradigm of understanding those problems and, therefore, require different solutions. Though identities, once constituted, usually endure and resist changes. The change in identity would require to overcome the bureaucratic and institutional resistance. Hence, in democratic and institutionalized states, such changes would be rare as “new” policy entrepreneurs may face resistance from institutionalized structures. However, non-democratic and less bureaucratic states may witness more sudden changes in identity and policy change if “new” policy entrepreneurs resist the old orthodoxy.⁵² They will face less resistance and will be more authoritative in bringing about change. While this remains an ideal type typology, it still remains an empirical question to explain under what circumstance will policy entrepreneurs lead to foreign policy change? In the next sections, I illustrate the case of the Maldives’ foreign policy variations to account for the timing and conditions of such change.

Nasheed’s democratic building and India-first policy

In 2008, Maldives held its first multi-party elections under the new constitution, establishing a presidential democratic system after three decades of dictatorial rule.⁵³ Mohammed Nasheed, the leader of the MDP, won the first Presidential election, defeating erstwhile dictator Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.⁵⁴ However, in the parliamentary elections, the MDP failed to garner a majority, making the opposition party, Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), led by Gayoom, control the parliament.

Mohammed Nasheed, after coming to power in 2008, fashioned state identity on the values of democracy and human rights. The threat faced by the island state was not as neo-realists would describe from the anarchic international system but from domestic political insecurity and vulnerability to environmental disasters. The representations of “self” and “other” were constantly articulated in the form of a nascent Maldivian democratic state

opposed to the old dictatorial system. The self-other distinction was based on its difference with the past – a democratic and liberal “self” vs “the non-democratic, dictatorial, non-liberal” past. The balance of power between the executive and legislature controlled by Nasheed and Gayoom further enhanced the insecurity of carrying out meaningful democratic norms.

Through these images of self and others, Nasheed articulated the primary objective of his state-building project as consolidating democracy at home, and any tendencies of democratic backsliding were viewed as insecurity to the state. His foreign policy doctrine was also guided by consolidating democratic and liberal values in the country with the help of other states and international organizations. Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly, Nasheed urged the international community to collaborate and assist the Maldives in the democratic transformation. He noted, “We must work together to strengthen various pillars of a democratic society, namely human rights protection, good governance, independent oversight bodies, free press and civil society.”⁵⁵

Among other things, linking democracy and successfully mitigating climate change was central to Nasheed’s projection. A democratic society, he opined, can allow more space for different and contrasting opinions during policy-making and can effectively tackle climate change.⁵⁶ In his formulation, climate change was not just an environmental issue but “linked with many other human rights issues and far more important security issues.”⁵⁷ For Maldivians, he remarked, “climate change, sea-level rise and climatic aberrations are all very fundamental human rights issues” connected to the right to life.⁵⁸ Ahead of the 2009 UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen, Nasheed held a cabinet meeting under the sea to draw attention to the world leaders about the issue of global warming and the imminent threat it poses to the Maldives.⁵⁹ In projecting climate change as a human rights issue and a threat to the survival of Maldivian society, he was at the forefront of securitizing the issue. He termed Maldives as a frontline country against climate change, juxtaposing it with the situation of Poland during the First World War, and emphasized the need to defend frontline states to cease the spread of the crisis to the core areas.⁶⁰ Facing the imminent threat of climate change, he announced that the country would become carbon-neutral by 2020.⁶¹

In the regional forums too, cooperation on climate change and democracy were key agendas for Nasheed’s administration. At the 17th SAARC summit, he outlined three key areas of cooperation among the South Asian states: economic integration, cooperation on piracy and climate change, and good governance and democracy.⁶² He asserted the need for creating a “regional mechanism for the promotion of good governance and human rights” that could strengthen “human rights governance” in the region and build a region of democracies.

The following issues, such as cooperation in democratic transformation, human rights and security were also central to India-Maldives relations under Nasheed's administration. By 2005, Maldives had already articulated India's first policy.⁶³ In 2009, the Maldivian Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed reiterated India's first policy and expressed the desire for broad engagement with India against the challenges faced by the Maldives in its transition toward democracy. He sought engagement with India against the potential dangers of democratic erosion and fear of receding to authoritarianism. Acknowledging the challenges of democratic transition and accepting the "footprints of authoritarian rule" ingrained within the institutions, Shaheed highlighted the challenges for the present government to transform from a "predatory society" to a "civic society" and the dangers of democratic erosion within this process. It is within these insecurities during transformation Ahmed Shaheed articulated India's role in Maldives as:

The exposure to instability will draw India's involvement in several areas where cooperation will be sought by the Maldives. These will focus on mitigating vulnerability to all sorts of threats, and therefore emphasising security cooperation and police collaboration . . . cooperation now needs to be expanded to cover new and emerging threats, co-eval with but not necessarily related to democratisation, such as enhanced maritime surveillance and security.⁶⁴

It is crucial to note here that in the above speech, the role of India was articulated as the security provider to the Maldives in the broadest terms including both external and internal insecurity threats that could challenge Maldivian sovereignty and its nascent democratic institutions. In articulating various dangers to the Maldivian state, the MDP government defined its relationship with India within the shared meanings of cooperation on democratization and against insecurities threatening the democratization project. Such representations of India shifted India's first policy toward a more comprehensive security-oriented partnership. Whereas earlier, India was only seen as a security provider from external threats, now its role was re-defined to help in democratic transition and act against internal threats that could hamper the transition process. The following role envisaged by Nasheed would later lead him to plead for Indian intervention in domestic politics whenever he feared democratic backsliding.

During Nasheed's term, India-Maldives relations strengthened with increased defense and security interactions. In 2009, the Indian and Maldives defense forces began their annual joint military exercise, *Ekuverin*. India also provided military hardware such as fast-track patrol vessels and assisted in developing critical infrastructure such as training facilities and radar surveillance systems. A comprehensive security agreement was signed that included the provision of a patrol boat, the stationing of Indian aircraft and the training of Maldivian security forces. India also

agreed to build a coastal radar surveillance system across the Maldivian archipelago.⁶⁵ Maldives, along with Sri Lanka, also joined the National Security Advisor (NSA) level Colombo security conclave focussing on maritime security.

During the 2012 political crisis, as the pressure on Nasheed intensified to resign, he sought India's help to diffuse the crisis. India refused to interfere in the political crisis and held that political parties should sort out issues between themselves and with the election date at the earliest.⁶⁶ As the crisis deepened, Nasheed was forced to resign at gunpoint which was later legitimized by the Supreme Court.⁶⁷

Mohammed Waheed, who headed the interim government after Nasheed's resignation, did not deviate from the earlier policy.⁶⁸ Under his term, Maldives signed an agreement with India to build major training and security facilities for police and security personnel at the strategic Southern atoll of Addu.⁶⁹ The meanings that defined India-Maldives relations under Nasheed would be completely different in Yameen's government and, therefore, had a different policy toward India.

Yameen: autocracy, non-interference and absolute sovereignty and modified India first policy

Abdulla Yameen, the leader of the PPM, won the 2013 elections that were intensely intervened in by the judiciary in his favor.⁷⁰ His tenure was marked by authoritarianism, by eroding democratic institutions and practices and systematically dismantling the judiciary, opposition and the media.⁷¹ In contrast to Nasheed's democratic state-building processes, his immediate interest was the survival of the domestic regime both from pro-democracy supporters and from foreign interferences. In his inaugural presidential address, he eloquently set the parameters of his worldview that revolved around preserving Islamic identity and sovereignty by intensely safeguarding the state from foreign criticism of the domestic system, which would be a common theme in all his speeches. In his inaugural address, he stated,

I will remain steadfast in preserving our Islamic Identity...The government will add further importance to enhancing existing ties with all our neighbours, as well as Arab and Islamic countries...I will, however, not allow unwarranted interference in our domestic affairs and thereby vehemently preserve our sovereignty.⁷²

In his speech at the UN, Yameen put forward the fundamental aspects of his regime's foreign policy based on noninterference, independence, and resisting injustice toward small states.⁷³ In the domestic arena, he consolidated powers by undermining the judiciary, opposition and parliament and suppressing media organizations.⁷⁴ Opposition leaders and his party members who were seen undermining his authority were jailed under the charges of terrorism.⁷⁵

Among others, this list included former President Nasheed and his own defense minister, Mohammed Nazim.

There was a substantial difference between Yameen's and Nasheed's regimes at the domestic level. However, this did not necessitate a different foreign policy. The foreign policy variations occurred because the debates on state identity and state-building were interlinked with the roles both these leaders envisaged for the "other" states. The role expectation for Nasheed emerged from his foreign policy doctrine that favored democratization in the country whereas for Yameen it emerged from absolute sovereignty and noninterference in domestic matters. However, for Yameen, the noninterference was an euphemism for foreign criticism arising due to his autocratic rule.

The democratic erosion led to unprecedented criticism of the Yameen regime by international organizations and Western democratic states. The U.S. Congress instructed the Maldivian government to release political prisoners and follow due process of law.⁷⁶ The deterioration in the democratic norms led the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to issue warnings of suspending it from the grouping if opposition members were not released and democratic institutions were not restored. Yameen, who fashioned a state identity based on absolute sovereignty and noninterference, did not take lightly the criticism of his regime and withdrew the membership from the Commonwealth.⁷⁷ These international pressures were linked to interference in domestic affairs. The demands to release political prisoners and restore democracy were viewed as the policing of larger states, as Yameen noted, it was an "unjust treatment" meted out to small states with international organizations acting as a policeman by penalizing them.⁷⁸ Yameen made his disappointment apparent in his address to the UN, and tried to justify his autocratic rule with the cultural argument, by pointing out that,

We are disappointed that some countries... have seen it fit to interfere in domestic affairs in the Maldives while taking the liberty to question judicial independence and integrity and condemning us for not supporting certain norms and ideologies that are entirely alien to our culture, our faith and our traditions.⁷⁹

Politically facing a backlash against his autocratic rule, Yameen also found himself in a precarious economic situation. Maldives, as a small state, relied mostly on international trade, foreign investments and grants. However, facing international censure, international organizations and donor states started putting conditionalities on investment and grants based on reforms in domestic political institutions. At the same time, Maldives graduated from least developed country (LDC) to a middle-income country. This has put her in a precarious position as it lost preferential treatment on grants and loans and exemption from import duties in the international markets.⁸⁰

Facing a disadvantageous position, Yameen began diversifying relations with countries that would not impose any conditionality of domestic

reforms for grants and aid. The foreign policy choices of Yameen's government, especially embracing China, need to be seen in this context of the state's autocratic turn, international censure, need for foreign markets and investment and respect for Maldivian sovereignty as envisaged by the government. Athaulla Rasheed notes that the China-Maldives relationship during the Yameen regime flourished because of the shared ideas of cooperation, development and respect for each other's political structures.⁸¹

India-Maldives relations, during Yameen's tenure, must be viewed from the lenses of state identity constructed by his regime based on noninterference in domestic affairs, absolute internal sovereignty and the need for foreign markets. On his first foreign visit to India, Yameen iterated the India-First policy and remarked that moving closer to China does not come at the cost of moving away from India.⁸² Defining the security relationship between them and the role of India, Yameen stated,

India is our closest friend and ally. . . Even in this government, we view the relationship with India as the closest and most significant relationship with a foreign nation. . . If we face something, like on 3 November 1988, the first door we knock on is India's. That has not changed. Our closest nation is India, therefore it will, by the grace of God never change.⁸³

With noninterference in domestic affairs and absolute sovereignty as the key determinants of his foreign policy strategy, Yameen's articulation of the India-First policy was eventually aimed to shift to the security relations that existed before Nasheed's tenure, where the Maldives viewed India as an external security provider in time of political or international crisis. Under Hermann's typology of foreign policy change, this would constitute a "program change," where Yameen articulated a change in methods through which its security relationship with India should be defined. This "role modification" meant that while Yameen expected India to be its external security provider, it did not approve of India managing its internal crisis or participating in state-building projects. The role expectation of external security provider was reflected during the censure of the Maldives by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group which Yameen saw as unfair and unjust. He remarked, "We look at India for continued support in preventing any unfair, punitive action by the CMAG on the Maldives."⁸⁴ Instead of balancing India through China, as some have argued, the defense partnership during Yameen's tenure was further strengthened when they signed a comprehensive action plan for defense in 2016. India also handed advanced lightweight helicopter to the Maldivian military and sent Indian military and technical staff to operate it. After India's opposition, Maldives also refused to pursue a defense agreement with the U.S.⁸⁵ If economic engagement with China was

a balancing strategy then strengthening the defense partnership with India and refusing US defense agreements at the behest of India would not have been a prudent strategy.

Reading India–Maldives relations through constructivist lenses

As noted above, two successive governments in the Maldives in the post-2008 period constructed different state identities within which they envisaged the state-building project and its relations with the world. For Nasheed the self and the Other were constructed based on producing a new Maldivian democratic state that was constantly threatened by its “past authoritarian self.” These anxieties led Nasheed to articulate his policy that would enhance democratic consolidation and safeguard the state from the threats emerging from democratic backsliding. The internal turmoil leading to authoritarianism was the central insecurity for Nasheed’s regime. On the other hand, for Yameen, the Other were external states that constantly interfered in the domestic political processes. Therefore, his policies demanded having absolute authority over the Maldivian sovereignty. With these contrasting state identities, one would envisage different policy actions by these two governments.

Maldives, as a small state, has limited state capacity and bureaucracy. It transitioned into democracy in 2008. However, the gains were lost as Nasheed was removed in a coup and later, Yameen followed authoritarian policies. The presidential system with a less bureaucratized state allowed both Nasheed and Yameen to construct state identity without much institutional pressure. The shifts in the state identity based on a democratic and liberal Maldives to Yameen’s authoritarian state that valued absolute sovereignty and non-interferences occurred without resistance. These differential state identities led the Maldives to redefine the nature of India-Maldives relations and the role they wanted India to play. However, the change in India-Maldives relations was not wholesale but only a slight “modification” of the meaning of India First-Policy.

There is a general agreement that the two governments followed different policies toward India. The mainstream discourse on the India-Maldives relationship argues that while Nasheed followed an “India-first” policy, Yameen embraced China at the expense of India and began drifting away from India. As noted above, this reading stems from the realist reading of international affairs that focuses on major power interactions and systemic incentives and gives little, if any, agency to small state agents in explaining their foreign policy choices. Here, Maldives’ close relationship with China is seen through a zero-sum game, where the movement of Maldives toward China is a movement away from India. However, one needs to ask whether embracing China led to a downturn in India-Maldives relations or if other factors were at play. Even if the former is the case, then realist scholarship is found wanting in explaining

how Maldives could simultaneously balance India and also sign a defense agreement with it.

The constructivist reading of foreign policy argues that actors act based on the meanings they give to themselves and others in defining the situation. From this perspective, it is fruitful to indulge in a process-tracing of events to understand the various articulations made by the Maldives within which they defined their relationship with India. The important point is to locate the trigger that led to the deterioration in ties and show how was that event constructed and articulated that emphasized differences of views leading to tensions between the two countries.

At the structural level, the regional security complex of South Asia is bipolar, contested by India and China. For much period, India was the dominant power in the region. However, in recent years China has increased its engagement with the South Asian countries. This affects India in two ways: first, it transforms the region into a bipolar contesting India's influence, and second, the increasing engagement of China with South Asian countries is not seen favorably by India.

India was indeed concerned about the growing Chinese footprints in South Asia and Yameen's embrace of China certainly made New Delhi nervous. China first established its resident mission in Male in 2011 and since then the interaction between them increased. In 2012, China provided the Maldives with a loan of \$500 million.⁸⁶ After Yameen assumed power, he responded positively to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and saw China as an alternative economic partner that would not interfere in Maldivian domestic affairs.⁸⁷ In 2017, he signed a free trade agreement with China becoming the second South Asian state after Pakistan.⁸⁸ The free trade agreement and joining the Belt and Road initiative led to growing economic ties between Maldives and China. In a short span, China emerged as the largest investor in infrastructure projects in Maldives, a top trading partner and the largest source of tourist arrivals in Maldives. While India watched these events with concern, as it saw the erosion of its sphere of influence, the ties between India-Maldives did not deteriorate, as the Yameen government followed India's first policy as shown through his commitment to strengthening the defense relations. Therefore, if it were not the mere presence of China that led to the deterioration of ties between India and Maldives, as is commonly argued, what would explain the low India-Maldives ties during the Yameen period?

Until 2018, apart from India's occasional concern about China's role in Maldives there were not any serious hiccups between India and Maldives. Following the tradition, Yameen made his first official visit to India, articulated India's role as the external security provider to the country, signed a defense agreement in 2016 and refused to pursue a defense agreement with the US because of India's concerns, along with tightening his rule domestically and embracing China's economic investments. It was only

after a series of events in February 2018, when Yameen imposed an emergency in the country that tensions between Maldives and India emerged and finally blew up when Yameen asked India to withdraw its military personnel from the island. It would be worthwhile to draw a picture of these events as they happened and how both countries responded.

In February 2018, the Supreme Court of Maldives overturned the convictions of the opposition members jailed by Yameen's government and ordered the government to release them and reinstate the parliamentarians immediately. Fearing that reinstating parliamentarians might bring a no-confidence motion against him and strengthen opposition just before the elections that were scheduled in the later half of the year, Yameen imposed an emergency in the country, arrested the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and former President Gayoom. In response to the emergency, Maldives' former President Nasheed requested India's military intervention to diffuse the crisis. In India, a section of strategic elites favored intervention in the Maldives. C. Raja Mohan, a noted foreign policy and security analyst, argued that it was a ripe moment for India's intervention.⁸⁹ Manvendra Singh, a legislator of the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and editor of *Defense and Security Alert*, noted that the crisis was an opportunity for India to intervene in the Maldives and stake claim to its status of global player. However, others argued for restraint citing India's lack of capacity and costly effects of intervention.⁹⁰ The Indian government expressed its concerns over the developing situation but refused to send any military help to defuse the crisis.⁹¹ However, it was reported that India moved aircraft and ships to its southern base, putting Special Forces on hold in case of any contingency.⁹²

India's attitude during the crisis showed disapproval of Yameen's actions. It declined the visit of Maldives' Special envoy and asked the Yameen government to implement the Supreme Court order and initiate the political dialogue with the opposition.⁹³ In response, the Yameen government rebuked India's concerns calling it an internal matter and bluntly telling India to stay away from the political crisis.⁹⁴ The call for intervention by the opposition members and MDP's good relations with India further created insecurities within the Yameen government of the political interference just before the elections. Following this Yameen refused the extension of the helicopters and Indian military personnel stationed on the island.⁹⁵ The Maldives also refused to take part in the naval exercise "Milan", however, both sides still conducted the naval surveillance exercise in the exclusive economic zone of Maldives.⁹⁶

As these events unfolded with the imposition of emergency in the Maldives and India's calls for accepting the Supreme Court judgment and initiating a political dialogue, the relationship between India and Maldives soured as the latter saw it as an unnecessary interference. With the growing Maldives-China relationship under the Yameen tenure, there was general discomfort within

India about losing its sphere of influence, however, it did not determine the course of India-Maldives relations.

As opposed to the realist reading that over-determines China's factor in explaining India's deterioration of ties with Maldives, the above argument shows that Yameen's preferences were influenced by his construction of state identity based on absolute sovereignty and noninterference. The "other" was constantly defined as one who would interfere in or criticize the domestic political process as he went on dismantling the democratic structures initiated by Nasheed's regime. These identity constructions implied a foreign policy framework within which the meaning of "India First" was changed from a comprehensive security provider to just an external security provider. It was when India criticized the emergency and pushed Yameen to initiate the political dialogue that, according to his worldview, India transgressed its "role" and became an "other," from which the Yameen regime had to safeguard itself.

Return of MDP and recalibration in India–Maldives relation

In the 2018 elections, the unprecedented victory of the MDP led by Ibrahim Solih again brought back the rejuvenation of ties between India and the Maldives. The new government said it would renegotiate the debt with China, reconsider the free trade agreement and have a relook at the Chinese projects. Symbolizing a reset in ties, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the swearing-in ceremony of President Ibrahim Solih. Since coming to power, both countries have expanded their areas of cooperation in defense, infrastructure and connectivity. On Solih's first overseas trip to India, New Delhi released US \$1.4 billion in aid for the Maldives to bail it out from the economic crisis and agreed to cooperate on security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region through coordinated patrols and aerial surveillance.⁹⁷ A US\$ 500 million package was announced to implement Greater Male Connectivity Projects connecting Male to three neighboring islands.⁹⁸

Maldives has tried to re-orient the role of India, and its India First policy under the broader categories that were envisaged by Yameen. This was reflected in Maldives Defence Minister Mariya Didi's statement, when she asserted that Maldives does not see any reason for military cooperation with countries other than India. The Maldives also renewed the agreements for the stationing of helicopters which the Yameen government had refused. In 2020, India provided the Maldives with Dornier aircraft to assist in joint surveillance activities and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.⁹⁹ In External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar's visit to the Maldives in 2021, New Delhi extended a line of credit of US\$ 500 million for defense projects and signed an agreement to develop a coast guard harbor and dockyard at Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF), a strategic atoll near Male.¹⁰⁰ In March 2022, India handed over a coastal radar system to enhance regional

security and inaugurated the National College of Policing and Law Enforcement, built with Indian grants.¹⁰¹

As the reset in ties took place between India and Maldives, with the Solih government strengthening the defense and security partnership with India, the role of India in Maldives has taken a contentious turn leading to a political tussle between the ruling government and the opposition parties, most visible through “India Out” campaign. The “India Out” campaign has gathered steam after the finalization of the UTF agreement, which the opposition argues based on the supposedly leaked documents that it would convert the island into India’s naval base and the Indian military would have exclusive rights to use the UTF facility.¹⁰² Mohamed Shareef, the Vice President of the PPM, stated that the protests are not against India’s presence in the Maldives but against the military presence which violates the country’s sovereignty.¹⁰³ The campaign has polarized the political discourse in the country with the present government referred to as the “slave of India” and giving away Maldives’ independence and sovereignty.¹⁰⁴ In response, the MDP government submitted a bill to ban the “India Out” campaign highlighting the negative implications on foreign relations.¹⁰⁵ Mariya Didi, the Defense Minister, also clarified in the legislature that the Maldivian government is the sole administrator of the island and the UTF agreement was implemented according to the defense action plan signed during Yameen’s tenure.¹⁰⁶

The sustenance of the “India Out” campaign reflects the changing politics after the 2008 democratic transformation of Maldives. The issue dominating the debate over the India Out campaign is the presence of India’s military personnel. However, the underlying cause of the debate is based on contrasting state identities fashioned by two main parties and role contestation in domestic politics. Particularly concerning India, the MDP-led government favors a close security relationship against both external and internal threats, which it has defined as relating to the backsliding of democracy among others, whereas, the PPM views the role of India as a net security provider from external threats and its role in their domestic politics as undue interference. The notion of absolute sovereignty by PPM leads to the demand to expel India’s military personnel which they view as a violation of sovereignty. Further, the discourse within India that contrasts MDP and PPM as pro-India and pro-China respectively further creates anxiety and insecurity among the PPM political elites that view the presence of security personnel as advantageous to the MDP and detrimental to their domestic political success if India plans to interfere in their domestic politics.

Conclusion

The following article explores how the constructivist framework can provide a more nuanced reading of foreign policy contrary to the realist

framework by explaining India-Maldives relations under successive governments. First, the constructivist framework allowed us to understand how the different ideas about state identity led to distinctive foreign policy preferences by the state actors. The different ideas of state identity by Nasheed and Yameen contain different meanings about sovereignty and insecurities facing the country, which eventually shaped their foreign policy choices. Nasheed articulated state identity in terms of democracy, human rights and climate insecurities and this was reflected in his foreign policy practices and relations with India. MDP government followed a closer relationship with India by following not only the “India first” policy but also the “India only” policy in the security domain whose security perceptions included both external and internal threats to the domestic political order. On the other hand, Yameen not only fashioned state identity based on absolute sovereignty and noninterference but his authoritarian practices also constrained his choices in seeking partners for economic investments. Though Yameen also followed the India-first policy by accepting India as the security provider to the Maldives against external threats at the same time his articulation of absolute sovereignty clashed with India’s diktats on Maldives domestic politics leading to the tensions between the two countries.

Second, the construction of state identity occurred due to both material and ideational factors and the domestic institutional environment. Both leaders had different understandings of how a small-state such as Maldives can retain its autonomy in the international system. For Nasheed, this had to be constantly done through building a democratic state, and therefore the meaning of autonomy and sovereignty were based on shared security practices by sheltering under India’s security umbrella. Whereas, for Yameen authoritarian state building and narrow construction of sovereignty were interlinked. For him, small state autonomy can only be safeguarded by keeping a distance from the major powers. However, the need to diversify relations, made him embrace China, which would not interfere with Maldives’ domestic political process. These needs were also a result of domestic compulsion after the political transformation the need to bring in the economic development that would make his candidature stronger in the next elections.

Third, the constructivist framework also showed us that the small states are not only reacting to the systemic constraints, as realists would have us believe but are actively fashioning their choices. India continues to view the Maldives-China relationship through the meanings it has attributed to China – as a rival in its sphere of influence. However, as shown above, the changing nature of the Maldivian regime has had different meanings for itself and the world and therefore acted in the international system according to those meanings. While India may see China’s presence as threatening, for Yameen building a relationship with China was not about undercutting Indian presence but

about diversifying relations and bringing in foreign investment without any conditionality on domestic political structures.

Fourth, the constructivist framework also allowed us to explain the change in foreign policy. With regard to the Maldives, neither was there an exodus shock nor policy failure that impelled a foreign policy change. The change was purely leader-driven. However, contrary to the domestic politics scholarship, the transformation in the regime is not sufficient to explain these changes. Yameen did not altogether alter its policy toward India but only slightly modified it. These modifications can only be understood within the context of his construction of state identity based on absolute sovereignty and non-interference that re-defined India's role. Yameen did this without resistance because Maldives remains a less bureaucratized and non-democratic state.

Fifth, as opposed to the realist reading of India-Maldives relations, which over-determines the China factor as a cause of the deteriorating relationship, this article, attempted to show the nature of the relationship is more complex and is fashioned by domestic politics and leadership. This also allows us to move beyond the Indo-centric understanding of the subcontinent, by looking at how peripheral states actively make their policy choices. The contrasting ideas about the role of India in its foreign policy strategy have led to fierce competition between the two main parties on the island state. As the new President Muizzu, belonging to the PPM-PNC coalition, takes center stage this debate about India's role in the Maldives is bound to continue. However, what must be noted is that these choices are neither structurally determined nor do leaders have a prior bias toward India leading them to make anti-India choices, but are formed through a complex interplay of domestic political competition, regional geopolitics and different ideas about the state building processes.

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