

Mohamed Nasheed, ex-Maldives prez
 Maldivians see India's role positively; in '88
 they came, resolved the crisis, and left.
 They were not occupiers but liberators.

Coercive Diplomacy Required

MALE AND THE ELEPHANT-DRAGON POWER STRUGGLE

CHINA IS USING ITS ECONOMIC AND MILITARY POWER TO ENCIRCLE INDIA THROUGH THE STRING OF PEARLS THEORY



Parliament is undemocratic. There are allegations of attempts at toppling governments, and making of personal fortunes including through sale of these islands, which are likely to be true. Those should not concern India. Yameen says he had to protect them. Yameen sent an envoy to brief his friends China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia about the present crisis. The trip to India was cancelled at India's request. There is increasing fundamentalism in the Maldives and reports of jihadis being exported to Syria. A progressive dispensation will be in India's interest. The population involved in economic activity that the booming tourism industry offers must ensure curbing fundamentalism, which may lead to terrorism affecting India. China on the other hand is not affecting India's interest. In fact, to its advantage if it weakens India. Military intervention which disrupts economic activity and alienates people at large should be avoided as long as there are no indications that India is using both overt and covert means to ensure that a reversal in favour to it is in power.

Due to geographic proximity, the people of Maldives depend on India for economic activity and for medical treatment. Educational opportunities in India for the people of Maldives should be increased as also Indian tourists visiting Maldives. India has to gain the confidence of the present Maldives government or get a new dispensation in place through coercive diplomacy. It is, however, not easy to decide whom to back and who will lose power; that is where our Foreign Service and diplomats have a role to play. Unfortunately, less importance is given to putting the best people in these smaller countries and the diplomats posted there may not have clarity on policy and intent from the Indian government in power. There are no rules in this game. A diplomatic victory is mandatory!

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POWER GAMES
 ■ China is using its economic and military power to encircle India through the 'string of pearls' theory
 ■ There are indications that India is losing influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives.

THE ONGOING MALDIVIAN CRISIS IS EMERGING AS A GEOPOLITICAL TUSSELE BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA TO INFLUENCE THE ISLAND COUNTRY' POLITICAL AFFAIRS. BOTH THE ECONOMIC POWERHOUSES ARE TRYING TO MARK A STAMP ON THE ARCHIPELAGIC NATION'S POLITICAL FUTURE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN.



It is not entirely unusual that Beijing has taken a position on other countries' domestic political crises. The post-Cold War foreign policy points to China's bold standing on many foreign crises that are not even remotely linked to its national interests. From the Syrian crisis to many conflicting matters in Africa, Beijing has taken positions, trusting that they will internationally augment its positioning and prestige in the world as a great power. China has even used the UNSC P-5 (permanent five) membership card to veto on many pressing global affairs. Its stance on the Maldivian crisis therefore should not really be surprising. If however becomes unusual, rather intimidating, when such positions are taken on domestic political affairs, keeping in view the strategic advantages that a particular country generally offers. China's stance on the current Maldivian crisis points to this adulatory, particularly to neighbouring India.

Beijing's position on the ongoing Maldives crisis combines a fine blend of visible ambitions and strategic confidence that China holds with the archipelagic country. Expressing outright support to Abdulla Yameen's regime, Beijing has called for "non-interference" from outside powers and has stated that Maldives will "independently" resolve its problem through dialogues. By articulating an indirect caution to India and, importantly, by showcasing its rising international might, China has called on the international community to not interfere in Maldives' internal affairs. This indeed points to China's standard official position. It has mastered the art of passing indirect cautioning to its adversaries. What however is really disturbing is how attentively Beijing is shielding Yameen's regime in Maldives and also asserting its positioning in the Indian Ocean, unweaving a grand global strategy. The crisis is emerging more as a geopolitical crisis between China and India to influence Maldives' political affairs and mark a stamp on the archipelagic nation's political future in Indian Ocean. Given India and Maldives' strong security, economic and political linkages, the archipelago has been diplomatically close to India over the years. A reversal in this trend was, however, witnessed in 2013 with Abdulla Yameen coming to



The archipelago had been close to India till a reversal in this trend was witnessed in 2013 with Abdulla Yameen coming to power. — AP

power and coysing up to China with his authoritarian approach of governance. He has employed a "China first" approach by welcoming Chinese investment, assistantship and presence in the country, sidelining the traditional "India first" approach that Maldives had adopted under Mohamed Nasheed, inviting serious disapproval from the opposition parties. Nonetheless, Yameen had gone ahead in identifying Maldives' strategic interests more with China than India, owing much to an effective Chinese diplomacy and outreach to the archipelago in general. Beijing under a "new era" foreign policy strategy has adopted a "pro-active" plus "going-out" economic diplomacy in the Indian Ocean with Maldives as a strategic hub. One of the highpoints of China's "new era" strategy is to carry out a multi-textured foreign policy combining hard and soft power cogently. With Maldives, a closer cultural linkage has been unfolding where tourism, education, infrastructure and economic cooperation are important sectors. Visiting Chinese tourists to Maldives in great numbers are the greatest strength of these budding economic and cultural linkages. A direct reflection of Beijing's "going-out economic diplomacy" is visible currently in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) where

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Maldives is a priority Signing economic deals, having frequent political exchanges, promoting cultural linkages, and backing a country's political regime are part of this "going-out" diplomacy. China's clout in Maldives became an established fact after the free trade agreement (FTA) was signed in December 2017. Yameen was the first Asian leader to be invited to China in the post-19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) where the leadership in Beijing expounded how Maldives figures as a key country in China's "new era" foreign policy strategy. Despite heavy domestic political opposition, Yameen signed the FTA deal by endorsing Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Signing an FTA was a first of its bilateral kind with a major country for this archipelagic nation and for China too as it is strategically

located in the IOR, marking its own authority as a strong economic power. Bagging Maldives' open support, especially as an "important partner" for Beijing's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), was another major achievement for China. Maldives' contacts with China reached a new height with Xi Jinping's visiting it in September 2014, after a gap of 42 years. The Chinese President was received by Yameen at the Male international airport to display their strengthening political bonding. Public support from Maldives is critical to China because it creates a favourable condition for Beijing's economic and maritime strategy in the "blue" search for smaller island countries, establishing stronger maritime and military networks with IOR countries. The search for smaller island countries, establishing stronger maritime and military networks with IOR countries, and backing a country's political regime are integral for China's MSR strategy. In fact, Beijing's "pro-active" diplomacy is positioning China as a top-ranking country in most of the countries' foreign policy drawing, allowing it to successfully secure the goodwill of Maldives to expand its South Asian outreach. While, the US's primary interest in South Asia was always security-centric, be it the India-Pakistan balancing game or maritime developments in the Indian Ocean, it also seeks to obstruct the Chinese progress

there. Nevertheless, with Donald Trump's retreat from Asia, Beijing is witnessing quite a favourable environment. It is, nonetheless, seeing the growing India-US bilateral ties and Japan's rising investment presence as a threat to its regional interests. To rank Maldives as a priority partner therefore becomes a natural choice for China. Beijing's stance on Maldives has a greater strategic objective to position itself as an effective Indian Ocean power. It was even pronounced during Xi Jinping's speech in the 19th National Congress of the CPC. China is relying on marine trading to supplement its economy and countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka are placed highly in this connection. China also aims to protect its sea lines of communication through Maldives and for future military build-ups. Therefore, it is extremely keen on checking and possibly preventing the prevailing Indian domination there. China's Maldives stance thus puts India's credential as a power to test, and more importantly, points to a larger fact: a growing hegemonic approach cloaked by protective measures.

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The Maldives constitutional crisis has again thrust China's growing encroachment into India's neighborhood into the spotlight. Maldives President Abdulla Yameen declared a 15-day State of Emergency. While India has condemned the declaration of a State of Emergency, China has tacitly backed the Maldives government's actions, crucially by not intervening in yet another flashpoint for regional competition.

BACKGROUND
 Viewing itself as a "big brother" to the Maldives, India has taken an interest in the stability of the country in the context of its

vision as the dominant power in South Asia. It intervened to defend the Maldives government from a coup attempt in 1988 and subsequently both countries enjoyed strong economic and political relations. However, these relations eroded after President Nasheed's ouster in 2012 as China initiated significant investments in Maldives (including some that India had intended to undertake) and signed a free trade agreement with the Maldives in December 2017. China sees the Maldives archipelago as a key node in its Belt and Road Initiative while India sees Chinese encroachment in its backyard, having its parliamentarily after the P.L.A.N sent three warships on a port call to the Maldives last year. Similar to what it did in



India is being forcing to choose between the high road and the messy, contentious road. — AFP

Doklam and other parts of India's neighborhood, China's support for Yameen in the garb of stability and prosperity has placed India in a bind, forcing it to choose between the high road and the messy, contentious road. If India supported diplomatic relations with the nations but opposed active intervention, it would distinguish itself as an upholder of the "rules based order" and the "free and open Indo-Pacific" by not allowing China to rise as a China-Influenced. If India intervened militarily to safeguard serious strategic interests, others in the region could view India as

autocratically as China, diminishing its influence and credibility as a defender of the liberal international order.

REASONS FOR CONCERN
 India fears "debt traps" set by China that could lead to land grabs and a potential military foothold on the archipelago. China sets these "debt traps" through infrastructure and white elephant projects financed by loans, masquerading as aid, which China then trades for equity stakes in the country's critical infrastructure. A country cannot repay the loan. Such an action in the Maldives would be threatening to India for two reasons. The Maldives is a series of 1,200 islands whose northernmost point is located roughly 400km from India's

southern coast. If China controlled those of these islands (or engaged in new island building), it could establish listening posts and naval facilities to monitor Indian naval activity or even construct air and naval bases to threaten the Indian mainland or sea lanes of India's trade and energy supplies. Second, India's ability to maintain its influence over the Maldives is a litmus test of whether it can fulfil the role of "net security provider" in the region. After a string of setbacks in influence in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, an erosion of influence in the Maldives feeds the perception that China is eroding India's sphere of influence. In such an "empower has no clothes" moment, not only would India suffer a loss of prestige, but India's reputa-

tion as the most consequential state in South Asia would be hollowed. **INDIA'S OPTIONS**
 Hawk and doves/moderates have both called for intervention, and there is some perception of US support for Indian intervention in the Maldives, but the Indian government has demurred from such an action. It seems highly unlikely the Indian government will intervene militarily in the Maldives as it did in 1988. Interventions today are messier, especially in a more competitive region, and could trigger greater resentment, blowback, and overextension. Instead, India could summon political and economic means to bring pressure on the Maldives government and induce a course correction, much like it did in Sri

Lanka in 2014-15. For instance, tourism is the most important industry for the Maldives accounting for a third of its GDP; more than half of foreign exchange, and over 60 per cent of total employment. While India only composes a small share of tourists, its Quad partners and their allies together from such an action. It had a significant impact on the industry and India could use diplomatic methods and information campaigns to further accentuate the pressure, as needed. **The author is a Senior Associate and Co-Director of the South Asia Program at the Washington D.C.-based Stimson Center.**