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Issue Brief

Maldives' President's China Visit

Anand Kumar

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S*ummary*

Muizzu's foreign policy choices, encompassing the bolstering of ties with China, the imposition of deadlines for Indian troop withdrawal, and the diversification of economic partnerships, signify a noteworthy shift in the geopolitical orientation of the Maldives. These changes present new challenges in the evolving dynamics of India–Maldives relations and the broader geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean.

Introduction

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu visited China from 8 to 12 January 2024. This visit garnered significant attention, as it was his first state visit to any country since taking office. He also became the first foreign dignitary to visit China in 2024. Prior to President Muizzu's visit, Maldivian Vice President, Hussain Mohamed Latheef visited China in December 2023, where he participated in the China-sponsored China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation (CIORF) in Kunming.

Prior to visiting China, Muizzu had visited Turkey and the UAE. However, his visit to China marked a departure from tradition, as all previous Maldivian presidents had visited India after assuming office. Muizzu's decision to break this precedent underscored the shifting dynamics in the Maldives' foreign relations.

Some reports however suggest that the Maldivian government verbally proposed a visit to New Delhi by Muizzu in November, but no progress has been made so far.¹ India–Maldives relations became strained after Muizzu reiterated his call for the withdrawal of Indian troops after winning the presidential elections.

In the presidential elections held in the Maldives in September 2023, Mohamed Muizzu emerged victorious, defeating Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Muizzu had launched his electoral campaign on the platform of ‘India Out’, aligning himself with his ally, former Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen. Both were perceived as being pro-China. Muizzu served in Yameen's cabinet during his presidency from 2013 to 2018. During this period, they facilitated extensive Chinese involvement in the Maldives through infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Before the China visit, Muizzu severed ties with his coalition partner, Abdulla Yameen, whose support played a crucial role in Muizzu's ascent to power.² Muizzu had contested the presidential election as a proxy for Yameen, who was in jail on money laundering charges. Despite expectations that Muizzu would, upon assuming power, lift the charges against Yameen and secure his release, Yameen remains in house arrest. Yameen has since broken alliance with Muizzu and formed his own political party, further complicating the political landscape in the Maldives.

The strained relations with India and Muizzu's pro-China stance have drawn attention to the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region. The visit was closely watched, considering Muizzu's pro-China reputation and the shift away from the ‘India First’ policy of the previous government.

¹ [“Male Proposed Visit to New Delhi by President Muizzu”](#), *Moneycontrol*, 9 January 2024.

² Mimrah Abdul Ghafoor, [“Rift Between Muizzu and Yameen Injects Fresh Tensions Into Maldives’ Politics”](#), *The Diplomat*, 12 December 2023; R.K. Radhakrishnan, [“Maldives Power Play: Muizzu Consolidates Control, Leaving Yameen in Exile”](#), *Frontline*, 8 January 2024.

China–Maldives Bilateral Relationship

China views the Maldives as a crucial country in neighbourhood diplomacy due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. The diplomatic relations between China and Maldives were established on 14 October 1972. The visit of President Xi Jinping to Maldives in September 2014 marked a significant milestone. During this visit, both sides signed an agreement to build a "future-oriented, all-round friendly and cooperative partnership".

China and the Maldives have experienced a steadily growing trade relationship in recent years. In 2022, the trade volume between the two nations reached US\$ 451.35 million, marking a 10.1 per cent year-on-year increase.³ Out of this, China's exports constituted US\$ 451.29 million against US\$ 60,000 of exports from Maldives. The Maldives primarily exports seafood and fishery products to China, while China exports machinery and construction material to the island nation. Chinese enterprises have accelerated investments in various sectors, including tourism, fishery, transportation and energy.

Maldives joined the BRI programme initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Under this programme, various infrastructure development projects have been carried out. Key projects include the construction of the China–Maldives Friendship Bridge, expansion of an international airport and various housing initiatives.

The China–Maldives Friendship Bridge, spanning 2 kilometres and considered a landmark project of the BRI, connects the capital, Male, with the neighbouring island of Hulhumale. President Muizzu has hailed it as the most iconic and transformative project in the country. China claims that BRI projects address the Maldives' socio-economic development needs, improving living standards and well-being.

Maldives' economy is highly dependent on tourism. China was its largest source of foreign tourists for a decade before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists reached 2,84,000, constituting 16.7 per cent of the total foreign tourist arrivals. In February 2023, both countries implemented a mutual visa-free policy.⁴

Maldives is rich in marine resources, with seafood as a significant export commodity. The new government wants to reduce dependence on tourism, diversify exports, enhance human capital development and promote clean energy.

³ [“Chart of the Day: China-Maldives Economic Cooperation”](#), CGTN, 7 January 2024.

⁴ Fathmath Udhma, [“Agreement on Visa-free Travel to China Takes Effect”](#), Raajje Maldives, 18 February 2023.

India–Maldives Bilateral Ties Come Under Strain

India and Maldives have historically enjoyed friendly bilateral ties, with the Maldives playing a crucial role in India's 'SAGAR' and 'Neighbourhood First Policy'. India is also a major contributor to the Maldivian economy through tourism. However, under President Muizzu, there seems to be a shift in Maldives' foreign policy. He has also distanced himself from his former mentor President Yameen.

President Muizzu has raised concerns about small number of Indian soldiers in Maldives, framing their humanitarian activities as a threat to Maldivian sovereignty.⁵ He has expressed intentions to reduce dependency on India across various sectors. He has decided not to renew the hydrographic survey initiative. This shift has strained the traditionally close ties between the two nations.

Some analysts believe that Prime Minister Modi visited Lakshadweep on 3 January 2024 in response to the hostile behaviour of President Muizzu.⁶ During his visit, he urged Indians to consider the island chain as an alternative tourist destination. Lakshadweep, strategically located with tourism potential, could also enhance India's surveillance capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

Modi emphasised the significance of Lakshadweep in India's development strategy, aiming to elevate its profile on the international tourism map. This move aligns with efforts to diversify tourism options and reduce dependence on popular destinations like the Maldives. Modi's visit aimed at establishing Lakshadweep as a key player in the global tourism industry, showcasing India's commitment to its development for both domestic and international tourists.

Through social media posts and retweets by Indian Embassies, Modi's visit strategically positioned Lakshadweep as an alternative tourist destination. This initiative not only targets Indian tourists but also aims to attract visitors from Europe and the Middle East. Modi's emphasis on Lakshadweep's economic potential can have economic impact on the Maldives' tourism-related revenues.

India–Maldives Diplomatic Row

The visit of Modi to Lakshadweep was followed by a significant diplomatic rift between India and Maldives. It was triggered by derogatory remarks of the three junior ministers in the Muizzu administration who openly criticised Prime Minister Modi and Indians on social media.⁷ This led to a widespread backlash in India and the

⁵ [“Maldives New President Asks India to Withdraw its Military”](#), *Reuters*, 19 November 2023.

⁶ Dhairya Maheshwari, [“Modi Sends Out 'Strong Message' to Maldives Through Lakshadweep Visit”](#), *Sputnik India*, 6 January 2024.

⁷ Neha Banka, [“India-Maldives Relations: Why PM Modi’s Lakshadweep Visit has the Maldives’ Social Media and Govt Officials Up In Arms Against India”](#), *The Indian Express*, 9 January 2024.

initiation of a ‘Boycott Maldives’ campaign, endorsed by Indian celebrities, posing a potential threat to the Maldives’ vital tourism industry.

India, being the largest tourist market for the Maldives in 2023 with 2,09,198 arrivals, followed by Russia and China, plays a crucial role in the Maldives’ tourism sector. The controversy prompted a large number of Indian tourists to cancel their plans. In response to the disparaging remarks against the Prime Minister, Muizzu suspended the three deputy ministers, aiming to address concerns raised by India and acknowledging the potential economic impact on tourism.

The Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) condemned the derogatory comments and emphasised India’s significant contribution to the Maldives’ tourism industry. Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer who was accompanying President Muizzu on the China trip, clarified that the remarks made by the ministers did not reflect the official position of the Maldivian government.⁸

The Indian government summoned the Maldivian ambassador to convey its concerns, and the Indian envoy met with the Maldivian foreign ministry, indicating diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions. These diplomatic measures taken by both countries also indicated a desire to maintain a constructive relationship despite the recent strains.

Key Highlights of Muizzu’s Visit to China

Muizzu spent the first two days of his visit in Fujian. Muizzu and First Lady Sajidha Mohamed visited the Xiamen Free Trade Zone in Fujian province, exploring economic opportunities and cooperation. Courtesy calls were made by senior officials of China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC) and Hunan Construction Investment Group (HCIG). Meetings with leaders of Fujian Province focused on enhancing cooperation in cultural, tourism, city-to-city, and fisheries sectors.

Muizzu, while addressing the ‘Invest Maldives’ forum in Fuzhou, urged China to regain its position as the top tourist contributor to the Maldives. Acknowledging China’s significant role in pre-COVID tourism, Muizzu stated that his strategy would be to attract more Chinese tourists. He outlined plans to diversify the tourism sector, including initiatives such as a top-tier hospitality school and exploring sports, medical and cultural tourism.

Muizzu held talks with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of People in Beijing on 10 January 2024. The discussions resulted in the signing of 20 key agreements across various sectors, including tourism cooperation, disaster risk reduction, the

⁸ [“India, Maldives Summon Envoys; Israel Walks Into the Spot Praising Lakshadweep’s ‘Enchanting Allure’”](#), *The Hindu*, 8 January 2024.

blue economy, and digital economy investments. The talks elevated the bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, emphasising mutual cooperation in economic, trade, investment and strategic areas.⁹

Muizzu expressed support for China's Belt and Road initiative. Notably, Muizzu acknowledged China's willingness to discuss potentially eased repayment terms for loans to the Maldives. The signing of an action plan for the China–Maldives comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership was to further solidify their commitment to collaboration in Belt and Road construction, disaster management, economy and technology, infrastructure, people's livelihoods, green development, and the blue and digital economies.¹⁰

China also committed to providing grant assistance to the Maldives, although the specific amount remains undisclosed. Agreements reached during the talks covered initiatives such as a social housing project on Fushidhiggaru Falhu, fisheries product processing factories, and comprehensive redevelopment projects for Male’ and Villimale’ Roads. The signing of a US\$ 50 million project to develop an integrated tourism zone on the Indian Ocean Island was also reported.

Muizzu's visit included a tour of the Chinese Communist Party Museum, where he familiarised himself with Chinese culture and historical moments. Muizzu hailed BRI projects as the most significant infrastructure projects in Maldivian history. He termed China as one of the "closest allies and developmental partners of Maldives". The upgrade in ties and commitment to exploring more partnerships under the BRI signify a proactive approach to intensify bilateral relationship.

Maldives had previously signed its Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China in 2017. It was the Maldives’ first bilateral FTA with any country. Muizzu stated that this bilateral FTA would be swiftly implemented to “boost” bilateral trade and investments, particularly by increasing the export of fish products to China.

Beijing is the largest bilateral creditor to the Maldives, owing China US\$ 1.37 billion, constituting around 20 per cent of its public debt. Chinese firms have invested an additional US\$ 1.37 billion in the Maldives since its decision to join the BRI in 2014. However, the World Bank cautioned against overreliance on China, citing potential risks of sovereign exposure and a lack of domestic investment opportunities.

China interestingly expressed firm support for the Maldives in safeguarding national sovereignty, independence and national dignity, offering to exchange governance experience. President Xi expressed support for increased direct flights between China

⁹ [“The Maldives and China Hold Official Talks”](#), Press Release, The President’s Office, Republic of Maldives, 10 January 2024.

¹⁰ [“Maldives, China Sign 20 Agreements After Muizzu-Xi Meeting Amid Diplomatic Row with India”](#), *The Hindu*, 11 January 2024.

and the Maldives which could benefit the Maldives' travel and tourism sector. In an interview with China's CGTN, Muizzu emphasised that China respects Maldives' sovereignty, and the relationship is built on mutual respect, and denied any interference in internal affairs.

President Muizzu concluded his trip by meeting Chinese Premier Li Qiang and other senior officials on 11 January 2024 before returning to Male. He reiterated the Maldivian government's commitment to providing complete cooperation to China in advancing the numerous agreements forged for collaboration across various sectors.¹¹

Chinese View on Muizzu's Visit

In Chinese media such as the *Global Times*, which is generally considered the mouthpiece of the Chinese government, the relationship is portrayed as mutually beneficial, emphasising equal treatment and cooperation between large and small nations. It also suggests that India should keep in view that the geo-politics of the region has changed.

The *Global Times* asserts that the visit by Muizzu signifies the mutual importance that China and the Maldives place on their relationship, aiming to establish collaborative agreements in politics, economy, culture and green development. The publication justifies Muizzu's departure from tradition. It emphasises the Maldives' independent sovereign status and Muizzu's statement that the country does not wish to be entangled in geopolitical struggles.

It criticises Indian and Western media for misinterpretation, accusing them of viewing the Maldives solely through the lens of China-India competition and neglecting the nation's sovereignty and legitimate interests.¹² The *Global Times* underscores Muizzu's clear stance that the Maldives intends to cooperate with various countries without exclusive alignment.

The publication also blames India for adopting a domineering stance towards neighbouring countries and praises Chinese diplomacy for adhering to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, treating sovereign nations equally, respecting their autonomy, and avoiding interference in internal affairs. It highlights the cooperation between China and the Maldives through projects like the BRI, focusing on national development and livelihoods.

¹¹ Mariyath Mohamed, “[President Muizzu Meets Chinese Premier Li Qiang](#)”, *The Edition*, 11 January 2024.

¹² “[What Does Maldivian President Visit’s Break With Tradition Signify?: Global Times Editorial](#)”, *Global Times*, 6 January 2024.

Assurances are extended to India regarding Muizzu's visit, with an emphasis that it poses no threat. The publication suggests that India should acknowledge the changing geopolitical landscape and respect the Maldives' sovereignty. It underscores that China's technical expertise is beneficial for the Maldives.¹³

The *Global Times* suggests that India respect the Maldivian government's decisions, particularly concerning state visits by the President. It asserts the Maldives' right to determine its state visits without undue influence from other countries, urging India to abide by the Maldivian government's wishes.

It suggests India to respect the sovereignty and independence of the Maldives, stressing the government's right to decide on military presence and foreign relations.¹⁴ The *Global Times* emphasises that China's BRI cooperation with the Maldives is a symbiotic relationship and urges India to adopt a more open-minded approach. It claims that China's cooperation with South Asian countries is not a 'zero-sum game'.

Attempt to Pivot Away from India

Muizzu, who ascended to power championing the 'India Out' campaign, has intensified efforts to distance the Maldives from India following his return from China. Emphasising the Maldives' independence, Muizzu stated that the nation is "not in the backyard" of any country.¹⁵ He took a subtle dig at former President Mohamed Solih, suggesting his close ties with India. Muizzu's emphasis on the expansive Indian Ocean and the Maldives' territorial claims within it signals a clear intention to shift away from India.¹⁶

In a bid to reduce dependence on India, Muizzu has pledged to diversify the Maldives' reliance on various sectors. Currently, the Maldives heavily relies on India as its primary supplier of essential commodities, with New Delhi providing a special annual quota for items such as eggs, potatoes, sugar, dal, rice, wheat flour, stone aggregates, and river sand, which are exempt from restrictions.

Muizzu wants to diversify sources for essential commodities such as rice, sugar and flour. He has negotiated a trade deal with Turkey, marking a significant step in diversifying essential commodity sources. A shipment has already been ordered from Turkey. Muizzu is also exploring new economic partnerships.

¹³ Victor Gao, "[Why India Misreads Maldivian Leader's China Visit](#)", *Global Times*, 9 January 2024.

¹⁴ Zhang Xiaoyu, "[Maldives' Withdrawal Request An Exercise of Sovereignty](#)", *Global Times*, 20 November 2023.

¹⁵ "[After China Visit, Muizzu Says Maldives 'Not in Backyard' of Any Country](#)", *The Wire*, 14 January 2024.

¹⁶ Ibrahim, "[President Muizzu Asserts Independence: 'We Might Be Small, But That Doesn't Give You the License to Bully Us'](#)", *Dhi Daily*, 13 January 2024.

Muizzu has articulated the government's intention to stop “importing low-quality medicine”, opting instead to procure directly from the original manufacturers. As part of the diversification strategy, Muizzu aims to transition medicine imports from India to sourcing them from Europe and the United States.¹⁷

Conclusion

The decision by President Muizzu to prioritise destinations other than India for inaugural foreign visit marks a notable departure and signals a shift in diplomatic priorities. This shift is exemplified by the government's apparent antagonism towards India, as evidenced by its decision not to renew the hydrographic pact with the Indian Navy and its call for the withdrawal of Indian troops by mid-March—an approach aligned with Muizzu's ‘India Out’ campaign.

Muizzu's warm exchanges with Chinese officials suggest a strategic pivot towards stronger ties with Beijing. Both nations have formalised agreements, including the Action Plan for a China–Maldives Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. Furthermore, economic ties between China and the Maldives have strengthened, with China emerging as the second-largest trading partner in 2022. The visit has also heightened the possibility of resuming Belt and Road projects, and there are indications of potential implementation of the China–Maldives Free Trade Agreement.

The emerging contours of Maldivian foreign policy under President Muizzu underscore a departure from the longstanding ‘India First’ policy towards a more pro-China stance. Emphasising a “pro-Maldives” approach, Muizzu contends that this is not a competitive stance but rather an effort to foster positive relations with major powers, including India and China.

Muizzu's foreign policy choices, encompassing the bolstering of ties with China, the imposition of deadlines for Indian troop withdrawal, and the diversification of economic partnerships, signify a noteworthy shift in the geopolitical orientation of the Maldives. These changes present new challenges in the evolving dynamics of India–Maldives relations and the broader geopolitical landscape in the Indian Ocean.

The region is witnessing a new geopolitical dynamic, characterised by the growing influence of China and the enduring cultural, historical and geographic ties between India and the Maldives. Simultaneously, the establishment of a US embassy in Malé raises the prospect of the Maldives becoming a potential focal point in the US's Indo-Pacific security agenda, further adding complexity to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

¹⁷ Mizna Mohamed, “[Maldives to Move Away from India-based Imports Like Staples & Medicine](#)”, *The Press*, 13 January 2024.

About the Author



Dr. Anand Kumar is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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