

INDIA'S SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY IN THE MALDIVES: CULTURAL AND STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The relations between India and Maldives are deeply rooted in historical and geographical proximity and are concretized through soft power assets. India's soft power diplomacy with the Maldives has been multifaceted, including Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement. Despite these successes, India's soft power diplomacy in the Maldives faces significant challenges due to geopolitical strains, the shifting foreign policy of Maldives, and the growing competition in the Indian Ocean Region. However, the recent election of Maldivian President Mohammad Muizzu, known for his anti-India rhetoric and China stance, has challenged the once stable and cooperative relationship. This study explores how India's soft power has evolved as a strategic tool to maintain influence in the Maldives amid rising geopolitical challenges. Through this lens, India's soft power diplomacy becomes not just an avenue for cultural exchange but a dynamic force in shaping the trajectory of strategic relations amid evolving regional dynamics. The main objective is to analyze India's soft power assets, which have helped to strengthen India-Maldives relations. Secondly, it examines the role and impact of India's soft power in fostering bilateral relations and navigating the geopolitical strain between India and Maldives.

Keywords: India-Maldives relations, Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Geopolitical Dynamics, China

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INTRODUCTION

The intricate tapestry of cultural relations between India and the Maldives is woven with threads of historical connections, religious affinities, linguistic ties, geographical proximity, and shared cultural elements. This rich tapestry has been further embellished through soft power assets, a nuanced and strategic tool that is pivotal in shaping the bilateral relations between India and Maldives. Maldives occupies a special place under India's "Neighbourhood First" Foreign Policy, which aims to bring stability and prosperity to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Also, both nations are key players in maintaining the safety and security of the IOR, thus contributing to the India-led Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision (High Commission of India, 2024). The relationship between India and Maldives has developed over time and has been shaped by various geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors. In this context, India's soft power emerged as a key element of foreign policy that aims to integrate cultural connections with strategic goals. India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives has been multifaceted, employing a wide range of India's soft power elements such as Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement. These initiatives collectively form a robust framework through which India seeks to reinforce its cultural and strategic presence in the Maldives.

Nonetheless, India's soft power strategy in the Maldives encounters challenges. The Maldivian political landscape is dynamic, with shifts in leadership and policy direction impacting India-Maldives relations. However, the recent political landscape has witnessed a notable shift, primarily catalyzed by the election of Mohammad Muizzu as the new President of the Maldives. Muizzu stepped up his anti-India rhetoric, and his robust China stance has a negative trajectory in the relationship, explicitly aiming to reduce Male's reliance on Indian influence. In this context, the once warm and brotherly relationship between India and the Maldives is undergoing a transformative phase and the interplay between soft power and strategic dynamics takes center stage as geopolitical landscapes evolve. India's soft power assets meticulously examine its role in navigating the complexities arising from the Maldives'

China stance. Against this background, there arises a question of how soft power evolved as a strategic tool for the Maldives and how soft power assets help to overcome the geopolitical tension between India and the Maldives.

As the Maldives navigates its foreign relations, it finds itself at the center of a significant power struggle in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Additionally, domestic political shifts within the Maldives and pro-China stance have profound implications for India. Increasing competition from other regional actors, particularly China, has raised concerns regarding India's ability to maintain its influence in the region. Amidst these challenges, India's soft power efforts aim to solidify its position as a trusted partner for the Maldives, balancing cultural affinity with strategic imperatives in a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. In the face of changing geopolitical dynamics, India's nuanced and effective approach, leveraging cultural ties, showcases a resilient strategy to fortify its strategic partnership with the Maldives. Through this lens, soft power diplomacy becomes not just an avenue for cultural exchange but a dynamic force in shaping the trajectory of strategic relations amid evolving regional dynamics. Given this context, the main objective is to analyze India's soft power assets, which have helped to strengthen India-Maldives relations. Secondly, it examines the role and impact of India's soft power in fostering bilateral relations and navigating the geopolitical strain between India and Maldives.

SOFT POWER: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the ever-evolving landscape of international relations, the traditional paradigms of power and influence have expanded beyond military strength and economic prowess. However, the 1990s marked a significant juncture where the traditional shibboleths of power underwent a profound transformation. This transformative period saw the emergence of a new dimension in the discourse of power, particularly with the introduction of the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye. Nye's conceptualization of power introduced a dualistic perspective, distinguishing between two facets: hard power and soft power. While hard power traditionally involves coercion, military strength, and economic might, and hard power relies on tangible and coercive tactics, often

associated with military force or economic leverage. In contrast, soft power recognizes the persuasive influence that culture, ideas, and appeal can exert on the global stage.

Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of “soft power” in his book ‘Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power’ in 1990. The term “soft power” was later explicitly coined and elaborated upon by Nye in his book “Soft Power: The means to Success in World Politics” in 2004. According to Nye, soft power is co-optive power or indirect power that can help in “getting others to want what you want,” and it shapes the preferences of others by the attraction of intangible resources such as universalistic popular culture or political cohesion (Nye, 2016). Soft power is used to shape the preferences of others without coercion and influence one feels subtly or surreptitiously (Mahapatra, 2016). Nye had identified three sources of soft power. A country’s soft power, Nye states, rests upon the attractiveness of its culture, its domestic political and social values, and the style and substance of its foreign policies (Nye, 2004). According to him, there are three mechanisms through which a country can sprout, deploy, or engage its soft power toward other countries: cultural relations, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy (Rivera, 2015).

Various scholars interpreted the concept of soft power in several ways: Wilson (2008) elaborated succinctly, “Soft power is a crucial element in the contemporary political context to achieve goals more smartly. Kurlantzick (2007) has defined soft power as “anything outside of the security and military realm, with not just common culture and public diplomacy, but even more coercive economic and political levers such as assistance and investment as well as involvement in multilateral organizations.” As the world becomes more interconnected, the strategic use of soft power has emerged as a crucial tool for navigating the complex landscape of global politics.

INDIA- MALDIVES RELATIONS: HISTORICAL AND RECENT DYNAMICS

India and the Maldives share a long and intricate history of cultural, linguistic, and religious ties that have shaped their contemporary diplomatic

relations. The Maldives hold strategic importance for India due to its location in the Indian Ocean, which aligns with the government's "Neighborhood First" policy. None other than India was the first to recognize Maldives as an independent sovereign state among the community of nation-states (Malone, 2011). In 1974, India was also the first to start a resident mission in Maldives. In 1988, India was forcefully saved Maldives longest ruling President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's government "from a political coup mounted by Abdullah Luthufi, assisted by Tamil separatist forces" (Thakur, 2023). In fact, India's swift military intervention during the 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives further solidified its role as a protector of Maldivian sovereignty, underscoring the depth of their relationship (Zahir, 2021). Under President Maumoon, Maldivian foreign policy took a lukewarm turn towards India.

The shift in dynamics grew during Abdulla Yameen's presidency in 2013, during which China's influence in Maldives increased through the Belt and Road Initiative (Bhadauriya & Mishra, 2023). Abdullah Yameen, overtly considered pro-China in India, visited New Delhi from January 1 to 4, 2014, and tried to alleviate the fears of the Indian elite that China would be given a free pass to the island nation. Sushma Swaraj, the then Foreign Minister, visited Maldives in 2015, keeping India's Neighborhood Policy alive despite Male having gone much closer to China. The years 2012-2018 saw a dramatic fall in the bilateral relationship between India and Male, due to Chinese control over the working of the foreign policy of Male. Although it should be mentioned here that the Chinese didn't get access to the critical projects on their own, it was facilitated by the then-Yameen government to counter the traditional Indian presence in the state as well as in the Indian Ocean Region. Although ties improved significantly under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's "India First" foreign policy. Solih's first visit to Delhi in 2018 revitalized the India-Maldives relationship, which had suffered during the Yameen administration (Goud, 2023).

The Maldives' relationship with India took a downturn when Muizzu, then a presidential candidate, rode a wave of anti-India sentiment encapsulated in the "India Out" campaign. After winning the elections in the Maldives on 17 November 2023, president Muizzu showed a clear tilt in favor of Beijing,

and chose to visit China in 2024. The two leaders, Muizzu and Xi signed over more than 20 MoU in various critical areas like “blue economy, digital economy, infrastructure development projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], disaster and risk mitigation, and news cooperation, through an MoU between the Public Service Media of the Maldives and the Xinhua news agency of China” (Marwah & Verma, 2023). Interestingly, after returning from China, Muizzu issued an ultimatum to India to pull back its 88 defense personnel responsible for operating the Dornier aircraft and helicopters given by India. These assets are used for surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Maldives, as well as conducting disaster relief operations across over a thousand islands in Maldives. Additionally, he has announced plans to host a PRC ship, Xiang Yang Hong 03, which is stated to be on a dual-purpose oceanographic mission (Yousuf, 2024).

The escalating tension between India and Maldives was further strengthened by the social media outbursts triggered by Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Lakshadweep. The two Maldivian ministers, Mariyam Shiuna and Malsha Shareef, labeled PM Modi a "clown" and a "puppet of Israel" on social media over his posts on India's Lakshadweep islands (Reuters, 2024). These actions, breaking ministerial protocol, significantly affected relations between the two countries. The diplomatic rift reached a critical point when the ministers were suspended in response to India's increasing dissatisfaction. Although the Maldivian foreign ministry clarified that these comments were personal and did not represent the government's stance, concerns persist. The foreign policy of Maldives has taken a significant shift from being a state to embarking previously on an ‘India First Policy’ to the ‘India Out Campaign.’ As a result of this significant shift in the foreign policy of Maldives towards India, the relationship has undergone substantive changes as well as witnessed stress and strain in the India-Maldives relationship (Shivamurthy, 2022).

SOFT POWER IN ACTION: INDIA’S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING BILATERAL TIES WITH THE MALDIVES

India's soft power strategy towards the Maldives involves several key areas: Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare

support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement.

Cultural Diplomacy

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays a vital role in promoting Indian culture in the Maldives through festivals, events like Diwali and Holi, and yoga and Bollywood programs (Isar, 2020). The Indian Cultural Centre (ICC) in Malé, established in 2011, offers language, dance, music, and yoga classes to strengthen cultural ties (Manoharan, 2014). Furthermore, India's support for preserving and promoting Maldivian cultural heritage, including restoration projects of historical sites and cultural exchanges (Kugiel, 2017). For example, experts from the NRLCCP in Lucknow, India, successfully renovated three historic mosques in the Maldives: the Friday Mosque in Male, the Fenfushi Mosque in South Ari Atoll, and the Dharumavantha Rasgefaanu Mosque in Male (Upadhyay & Mishra, 2024). Additionally, Yoga serves as another cultural link between India and Maldives (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2023). Traditional Indian paintings like Madhubani and Warli art adorn many Maldivian homes and businesses, adding elegance and charm (Maaz, 2021). Bollywood films, yoga, language, and literature are extremely popular in the Maldives (Aheibam & Maluleem, 2023).

Educational Assistance

India has significantly strengthened educational ties with the Maldives by providing education and scholarships to Maldivian students. The scholarships, including the ICCR scholarships, cover tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses for undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies in India (Hashimy, 2023). For example, in 2023 alone, India provided 200 scholarships to Maldivian students to study in Indian universities (Manoharan, 2024). Many prominent Maldivians like Mohamed Nasheed, Mohamed Waheed Hassan, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, and Mariyam Shakeela have studied in India, shaping the country's socio-political landscape. These individuals have leveraged their education from India to make significant contributions to various fields in the Maldives, reflecting the strong educational ties between the two nations (Jain, 2023). Approximately 25% of teachers in the Maldives are Indian, playing a vital role in the development of the Maldivian education sector. This educational

cooperation contributes significantly to capacity building in the Maldives, fostering a sense of cultural and professional reciprocity (Times of India, 2024a).

Development Aid

India is involved in various development projects in the Maldives, such as infrastructure development, and disaster relief. “India has assisted the Maldives in several areas of development, such as providing concessional budget support, credit for water and sewerage facilities in selected islands, and the construction of other civic infrastructure projects” (Ranjan, 2021). India has provided financial support through standby credit facility to the Maldives amounting to US\$100 million in 2008 and \$100 million in 2011 (Ministry of Finance, Republic of Maldives, 2020). On August 13, 2020, India said it would provide funding for the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP), fulfilling its pledge to build public facilities in the Maldives. During Jaishankar's trip in 2021, the Addu City road and drainage system construction contract was granted. During Jaisahnkar's visit, the Memorandum of Understanding for the construction of a Geydhoshu Mas Plant at Noonu Atoll Kendhikulhudhoo was agreed upon. With funding from an Indian credit line, the Hanimaadhoo International Airport Development project aims to build a new terminal that will boost its capacity to handle 1.3 million passengers each year. In 2023, India and the Maldives signed nine new MoUs for local projects and contracted the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) to boost infrastructure. After the 2004 tsunami, India provided quick relief with supplies, ships, and medical aid, spending Rs. 36.39 crores and later offering Rs. 10 crores in financial aid.

Tourism

The Maldivian economy relies heavily on its tourism sector, which is the primary source of foreign exchange earnings and government revenue. As the closest neighbour, India plays a pivotal role in driving tourist arrivals to the Maldives, with the number of Indian tourists experiencing a remarkable sevenfold increase over the past 12 years, spanning from 2011 to 2023 (Ministry of Tourism, Maldives, 2023). Despite the challenges of the pandemic in 2020, India became the largest source market for the Maldives,

with nearly 63,000 Indian visitors. This trend continued in 2021 and 2022, with India remaining the top market, with over 2.91 lakh and 2.41 lakh Indian tourist arrivals, respectively, capturing 23% and 14.4% market shares (The Economic Times, 2024). In March 2022, India and the Maldives agreed to an open skies arrangement, which is expected to enhance connectivity between the two countries, further boosting tourism (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023). According to the Maldives Tourism Ministry statistics, more than 2.09 lakh Indians visited the island nation in 2023 (The Economic Times, 2024a).

Healthcare support

India provides significant healthcare support to the Maldives through medical infrastructure and services. The Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital was inaugurated in 1995 with 200 bed hospital was established at an estimated cost of Rs.42.5 crores. India has become the preferred destination for Maldivians seeking specialized medical treatments and surgeries that may be either unavailable or limited in their home country (India Today, 2024a). Notably, in 2021, Maldivians constituted the third- largest group individuals visiting India for medical treatment. The proximity of India to the Maldives, direct flights, and affordable healthcare options make it an attractive destination for Maldivians (Binoy, 2017). Medical tourism not only benefits the patients but also contributes to the economy of both countries and strengthens their bilateral ties (Shanmugam, 2013). Maldivians make up about 15-20% of the 3,000 foreign nationals seeking medical care in Kochi monthly, with around 600 receiving treatment under the Maldivian government's 'Aasandha' universal health insurance scheme. According to the Kerala Medical Tourism Facilitators Forum and the Association of Medical Facilitators, Kerala, Oman nationals are the largest group of medical tourists in Kochi, followed by individuals from Maldives, Africa, and Gulf Cooperation Council countries (The Hindu, 2024a).

India's diaspora in the Maldives is seen as a significant bridge that is beneficial for Indian cultural diplomacy. According to the Ministry of External Affairs (2023), India, as of June 2023, an estimated population of 27,000 of the Indian diasporas in the Maldives serves as a bridge between the two

nations. Through remittances, investments, and employment generation, the Indian diaspora significantly impacts the Maldivian economy. The Indian High Commission in the Maldives actively engages with the diaspora, providing consular services and facilitating cultural exchanges (Pradhan & Mohapatra, 2020).

Capacity Building

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program plays a significant role in conducting capacity-building programs for Maldivians in various fields. Several MoUs have been signed between India and the Maldives to strengthen human resource capacity building in various sectors (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). India is the primary provider of training for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), fulfilling about 70% of their defense training needs. The MNDF also participates in various military-to-military activities with India, including joint EEZ patrols, anti-narcotic operations, search and rescue (SAR) missions, the sea-rider program, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises, adventure camps, and sailing regattas. Indian Navy has also provided MNDF with air assets for air surveillance, MEDEVAC, SAR, Helo-borne vertical insertion capability (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Notably, around 70% of the Maldives' defense training is provided by India, either on the islands or in India's prestigious Military Academies. (The Geopolitics, 2024). The collaboration extends beyond training to the provision of critical resources, as the Indian Navy has supplied aircraft and helicopters to the Maldivian defence forces for aerial surveillance (The Diplomat, 2023)

Bilateral and strategic engagement

India and Maldives have strong Bilateral relations, encompassing political and security, maritime, trade, etc. Due to its location in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives holds strategic significance for India as part of the government's "Neighbourhood First" policy. India has made many bilateral treaties and strategic partnerships with the Maldives. The Maldives consistently supports India in forums like the UN, Commonwealth, NAM, and SAARC, and India backed the Maldives for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security

Council for 2019-20. India and the Maldives signed a maritime treaty in 1976 defining their boundaries. In 1982, a diplomatic issue arose when India misinterpreted a speech by the Maldivian president's brother as a claim to Minicoy Island, but the Maldives clarified it was about cultural ties. On trade, both countries signed a comprehensive agreement in 1981 and are founding members of SAARC and the South Asia Free Trade Agreement, promoting regional cooperation.

The 1988 Defense Cooperation Agreement established India's role in training Maldivian forces and addressing equipment shortages. That year, India intervened in Operation Cactus to thwart a coup, strengthening defense ties. Subsequent agreements include the Comprehensive Security Cooperation Agreement (2016) and the Radar Network Agreement (2018), enhancing maritime surveillance across all 26 Maldivian atolls. The Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) signed a technical agreement for sharing "White Shipping Information" on non-military vessels. Both nations also conduct joint military exercises, like Ekuverin, and work on defense infrastructure projects such as the Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS). In June 2019, Modi visited the Maldives and signed an MoU on Hydrography and a technical agreement on White Shipping Information (India-Maldives Joint Statement During the State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives, 2019).

GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN THE MALDIVES (ANALYSIS)

India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives is molded by a complex geopolitical landscape, particularly influenced by regional dynamics and external actors. India encounters diverse geopolitical challenges in sustaining its soft power: the impact of external actors on the Maldives, the shift in Maldivian foreign policy, and geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean (IO).

Impact of external actors on the Maldives

Maldives has become a geopolitical hotspot of competition between India, the US, and China. While Washington has limited interaction with Male,

it looks upon the government in New Delhi to keep its feet firmly implanted there as it knows that both the states have long cordial relations and India's soft power assets suffices the job of keeping the state under check. Beijing on the other side, has started a robust strategic campaign to earn the dividends that the access to a vital geopolitical state like Maldives can provide. Economics, trade, and investment have been the bedrock of deepening ties between Maldives and China. China, a major economic giant, has very cleverly used its economic strength and financial tools to lure the smaller economically poor states who are in dire need of financial assistance. Chinese inroads into the Maldivian economy took a flight during the 2008 economic crash when tourism the backbone of its economy took a significant hit.

China's involvement in the Maldives has expanded through infrastructure development projects, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One of the most significant infrastructure projects, Sinamale Bridge (China-Maldives Friendship Bridge), connects the capital city of Malé to the nearby Hulhulé Island (where Velana International Airport is located) and is Funded by Chinese loans. In addition, China funded the renewal of Velana International Airport. These projects have bolstered China's economic presence, potentially diminishing India's influence. It has challenged India's traditional dominance in the absolute sense and raises questions about the impact of its soft power assets in the state. China's growing economic clout allows it to exert political influence, creating competition for India.

The Chinese presence in the region (from Qatar to the Strait of Malacca) providing annually space to more than 1 million cargo ships challenges the yet privileged position of the Indian Navy (Shukla, 2018). The Chinese development of Special Economic Zones, seaports, etc. along the region directly conflicts with the Indian policy of sharing the Free and Open Indo-Pacific region (FOIP) and will give China an upper hand in the Sino-Indian rivalry. Maldives' decadal bilateral trade figures with India and China show that the change of the government in Male also brings a subsequent change in its foreign policy preferences (Table 1.)

Year	China Exports	China Imports	India Exports	India Imports	Year
2010	58.2	0.374	141	30.8	2010
2012	93.6	4.06	163	7.65	2012
2015	190	0.161	228	6.23	2015
2018	511	5.47	263	8.12	2018
2020	273	5.32	196	17.1	2020
2021	406	22.17	591.79	50.7	2021

Table 1. Bilateral Trade of the Maldives with China and India between 2010 and 2021 (Million Dollars).

Source: Trade Economics, 2022 <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/exports/maldives>.

The numbers clearly point to the staggering rise of Chinese exports to the Maldivian market, however India has not lacked behind in giving China a tough competition, even surpassing the total export value of USD 91.79 million against \$406 million of China in the year 2021. Alongside the pro-China voices of "India Out," the slogan "India First" was also disseminated to foster friendly relations (Thakur, 2023). That's why Indian exports to Maldives saw a steep rise once the Solih's government, mostly considered pro-India, took a positive step towards having an open and friendly relationship with New Delhi.

Despite the increased Chinese involvement in the Maldives, the impact on bilateral relations between the two nations is considerable. This influence was particularly evident during the Maldivian president's recent state visit to China, where both countries advanced their ties by establishing a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.' The partnership aims to strengthen political guidance through high-level engagements, expand practical cooperation across various sectors, enhance collaboration in international and multilateral arenas, improve the well-being of both populations, and work towards a shared future for China and the Maldives (The Hindu, 2024b). These agreements do not necessarily indicate Chinese intent to alter the regional security balance and the triangular relations between China, the Maldives, and

India. Nevertheless, military collaboration could be part of China's broader strategy to leverage power and diminish India's sphere of influence over South Asian countries. However, they have raised concerns, especially in India (Loc, 2024).

The shift in Maldivian foreign policy

Maldives has mostly played a very safe card in shaping its foreign policy towards both India and China. As a small state, the Maldives does not have many foreign policy options other than either to smartly manage its relations with big powers or align with a powerful state or a group of states for security and economic reasons" (Ranjan, 2021). From an India First strategy, it has moved to a more balanced involvement with diverse states including US to benefit from its geo-strategic location. Changes in the Maldivian government significantly impact India's diplomatic relations. The government of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih (since 2018) has been more pro-India, while the previous government under Abdulla Yameen leaned towards China. The strategy of tight military and security cooperation with India and the US was adopted by the previous Solih government, but under the current Muizzi government, the Maldives has demonstrated a distinct change. It seems that the current government has picked its side, and this "alliance of shelter" (Bailes et al., 2016) with Beijing is considered more fruitful compared with the gains accrued from bonding with New Delhi. The soft power tools of India to keep a working cordial relationship with the Maldives government has been overrun by the hard power tactics of the Chinese state.

During the Muizzi government, there has been a rise in "India Out" movements in the Maldives, driven by some factions within the country's political landscape. These movements oppose perceived Indian interference in Maldivian domestic affairs and are often amplified by external actors, including pro-China groups. However, the mounting economic troubles in the Maldives, including high debt and economic instability, made President Muizzu decide to reconcile with India. With its economy presently valued at USD \$7.2 billion, the Maldives' debt level remains at over 115 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). From 2022 to 2024, the country has been obligated to spend an average of USD \$300 million annually toward servicing

its foreign debt. The Maldivian government is scheduled to service almost USD \$1 billion in debt in 2026 alone — the highest debt repayment in a single year in the country's history. Ties with China have only served to heighten these fiscal concerns. Over 60 percent of the Maldives' sovereign-guaranteed debt is owed to Chinese financial institutions such as the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China. As economic cooperation with China grows, the Maldives' debt burden may become unsustainable, leading to mounting pressure to borrow more and risking uncontrollable inflation (The Hindu, 2024; IMF, 2024; ORF, 2024; South Asian Voice, 2024).

Although Muizzu was known for his pro-China stance during the campaign, the Maldives' economic dependence on India, especially in areas like aid, trade, and tourism, made improving relations a pragmatic choice. India's involvement in infrastructure development and financial aid packages has been crucial for the Maldives in addressing its economic challenges. President Muizzu recently tried to reassure the neighbouring country by calling India its 'closest ally' and expressed hope that "India will accommodate debt relief measures for the Maldives' in the repayment of the hefty loans taken from the country over consecutive governments." Rather than completely alienating one country, Muizzu has begun to carefully rebalance and strategically assert the Maldives' position in the India-China relations after his initial hardline approach (Thome, 2024).

Geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean (IOR)

Maldives is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean, which contains major (international) water channels of communication. A substantial amount of China's trade and almost 80% of its energy imports—oil and gas—pass across the Indian Ocean, particularly through the Strait of Malacca. Maldives is central to China's Indian Ocean strategy. Maldives is a part of the MSRI (Maritime Silk Road Initiatives) through the Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development Project, or IHavan, which is located on the northernmost island. The project passes over the seven-degree channel that holds a key geostrategic location since it connects major shipping routes from Southeast Asia and China to West Asia and Europe. China has strategically placed a project in the region to take advantage of the US\$18 trillion worth of goods transported

across the seven-degree channel annually (ORCA, 2022). Notably, China's growing interest in investment projects across the Indian Ocean, especially since the early 21st century, is significant as both the Pacific and Indian Oceans contain China's vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for commercial and energy supplies.

In January 2024, the Maldives and China signed several bilateral agreements focused on maritime security cooperation, which included joint naval exercises and discussions about establishing a maritime research station in the Maldives, along with defense and energy partnerships during President Muizzu's visit to Beijing. These proposals are part of China's broader strategy to establish a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean and Maldives, a move that could disrupt the delicate balance of power in the region (Oberoi, 2024).

While China's military engagement in the Indian Ocean is limited compared to India's. But, during the recent visit, the Maldives signed two defense agreements with China, committing to providing military assistance. The recent defense pacts and growing alignment could bolster China's influence in the Indian Ocean. However, military collaboration could be part of China's broader strategy to leverage power to diminish India's sphere of influence over South Asian countries. As part of the 'String of Pearls,' the Maldives could enhance China's maritime capabilities and presence despite its historical context within India's sphere of influence (Loc, 2024). The Maldives' decision to partner with China militarily while removing Indian military presence from its islands may further upset India and lead to a more hostile perception of Beijing's efforts to exert global influence. As the China-Maldives relationship strengthens, this development holds significant implications for China's influence abroad and regional dynamics in the Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific (Thome, 2024).

China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean has heightened India's concerns about maritime security in a region where it has traditionally held dominance (ORCA, 2022). In response, India acknowledges that it cannot overlook China's emergence as a key player in the Indian Ocean. China has been solidifying its presence through various maritime agreements in the region, which India views as a direct challenge to its role as the security guarantor. India is concerned about China's growing involvement with the

Maldives and Sri Lanka through investments, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements, which are solidifying Beijing's presence in the region. Similarly, Beijing has been competing with countries such as the United States and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen partnerships and security agreements. Although India cannot deny China's rising influence in the long term, the strategic use of smart power, addressing a range of shared concerns, can help India reinforce its position in the region.

Impact and Response to Geopolitical Strain on India-Maldives Relations

The geopolitical strain on India-Maldives relations has impacted bilateral ties in several ways. During the period of diplomatic strain, soft power assets such as Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement come to the forefront and are put to the test. The strained relations between India and Maldives had significant economic implications, particularly in the tourism sector, which is a cornerstone of the Maldivian economy, with reduced inflows from Indian tourists. India was the top source of inbound tourists to the Maldives in 2023, contributing around 12% of total visitors, and China was in the third spot (Oberoi, 2024). The number of tourists from India declined by 42% in the first four months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. While the Maldives received 73,785 tourists from India between January and April of 2023, the island nation recorded 42,638 tourist arrivals in the same period this year - a decline of 31,147 tourists in absolute terms. Between April and June this year, only 28,604 Indian tourists visited the Maldives, down from 54,207 during the same period last year—a nearly 50% decrease (India Today, 2024b).

Meanwhile, Chinese tourists have surged, with China becoming the top source of visitors with 1.2 lakh arrivals in the first half of 2024. (Times of India, 2024b). Indians, on the other hand, were only 63,450 - a drop of 42.5% and India became the sixth market for tourism in Maldives. Overall, tourist arrivals in Maldives increased 9.2% in the first half of 2024, compared to the same period last year, and the Indian boycott seems to have greatly affected the dwindling numbers (Hindustan Times, 2024a). Due to strained relations,

Indian celebrities and Bollywood stars, who frequently visited the Maldives' luxury resorts, also curtailed their trips, contributing to the slump in tourism revenue. The tourism sector, which is heavily reliant on Indian visitors, suffered a sharp downturn, leading to pressure from the business community on the Maldivian government to mend ties with India (Oberoi, 2024). Moreover, the Maldives' reliance on India for healthcare services and economic support became increasingly evident during the standoff.

In response to the geopolitical strain, the foreign minister of Maldives, Moosa Zamer, has acknowledged that the Maldives-India ties witnessed rough patches in the initial days of President Mohammad Muizzu-led government but insisted that the two countries have resolved the "misunderstandings" following the repatriation of Indian troops from the Maldives (The Economic Times, 2024b). Amid a diplomatic standoff, Maldives Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer arrived in New Delhi on 8th May 2024 to discuss bilateral ties, marked a key moment in the diplomatic reset between the two countries. During his visit to India, the two sides discussed bilateral and regional issues and sought ways to provide impetus to our multifaceted relationship (NDTV, 2024). Also discussed the ongoing Indian-backed projects in the Maldives, which have been instrumental in the country's development. Under the circumstances, Maldivian President Muizzu now aims to rebuild and maintain a cautious relationship with India. During Dr. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister of India to Maldives from 09-11 August 2024, president Muizzu appreciated India's continued developmental assistance provided to Maldives and reaffirmed his commitment to deepen the India-Maldives relationship further (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). On Friday, September 26, 2024, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu denied having espoused an "India Out" agenda during the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. He reiterated, "We have never been against any one country at any point (The Hindu, 2024c). Muizzu further stressed that he had taken action against deputy ministers for insulting Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media. "No one should say such a thing. I took action against it. I will not accept insulting anyone like that, whether he is a leader or an ordinary person. Every human being has a reputation" (Times of India, 2024c). The resignation of ministers indicated the Maldives' symbolic gesture was to rebuild diplomatic ties. According to

the Hindustan Times (2024b), Muizzu will travel to India in the second week of October for a visit that is seen as an attempt to reset bilateral ties after an acrimonious period in the relationship.

India's responses emphasized that they did not hold a grudge against the Maldives, prioritizing the strong people-to-people relationship over political disputes. India's influence in the Maldives extends beyond politics and economy, encompassing cultural, educational, and development. However, the resilience of these connections, built over decades, helped prevent a complete breakdown in relations. These soft power elements are playing a crucial role in rebuilding trust and cooperation. The strained relations highlighted the extent to which cultural ties are intertwined with diplomatic relations (Oberoi, 2024).

Despite ongoing diplomatic strains, India-supported and sponsored projects continue to progress. Since 2022, India has extended USD \$900 million in credit to the Maldives for multiple projects, including the development of water and sanitation facilities in 34 islands, the redevelopment of the Gan International Airport, and road development and land reclamation in the Addu Atoll. Beyond these large-scale projects, India is also supporting 65 community development projects across the Maldives worth USD \$23 million, which include a diverse array of fish processing plants, drug detoxification centers, cultural centers, and sports complexes. Many of these projects remained unaffected by the strained relations. In addition, in the recently announced budget for 2023-24, the Maldives was granted Rs 770.90 crore as aid, an increase of over 300 percent from the Rs 183.16 crore granted in 2022-23 (Bhattacharjee, 2024).

India-Maldives relations reached a turning point during External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit Maldives from August 9-11, 2023. The visit took place amidst rising geopolitical strains, particularly the growing influence of China and internal anti-India sentiments, including the "India Out" campaign. His recent visit to the Maldives, described as highly successful, was a testament to India's commitment to deepening bilateral relations. Jaishankar was received warmly in the Maldives, where he met with President Muizzu and other key officials, signing several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)

that paved the way for renewed cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, health, and education. EAM Jaishankar held talks with Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer to review bilateral relations. He also discussed strengthening the defence and security partnership with the defence minister. Additionally, he met with the Ministers of Finance, Economic Development, and Trade and the Governor of the Maldives Monetary Authority to explore ways to boost trade and economic ties. In Male, MoUs were exchanged on capacity building of an additional 1000 Maldivian civil servants in India and on the introduction of UPI in Maldives. Six High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) under grant assistance from India in the areas of mental health, special education, speech therapy, and street lighting were also jointly inaugurated (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The ministers visited the India-assisted Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) site and Addu City on 11 August 2024 and jointly inaugurated the Addu Reclamation and Shore Protection Project and Addu Detour Link Bridge Project. The visit underscores the significance of the Maldives, India's maritime neighbour, as a key partner in the 'Neighbourhood First' policy and India's Vision 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

CONCLUSION

India's soft power diplomacy towards the Maldives stands as a multifaceted and strategic endeavor. The multifaceted approach through Cultural diplomacy, educational assistance, development aid, healthcare support, capacity-building, tourism, and diplomatic and strategic engagement, has played a pivotal role in maintaining and strengthening bilateral ties. Despite the geopolitical challenges posed by the Maldives' pro-China stance under President Mohammad Muizzu, soft power assets have served as a stabilizing force. Amidst growing external pressures from other regional powers, India's soft power assets help to strengthen trust and cooperation with the Maldives, ensuring a stable partnership that supports India's strategic interests in the region. In a shared perspective, both Indian and Maldivian thinkers perceive the ongoing political tensions as a temporary phenomenon. This shared viewpoint reflects a pragmatic understanding of the fluidity inherent in international relations, suggesting an optimism that the current political tensions may

not have a lasting impact on the overall relationship between India and the Maldives. The recent dynamics in India-Maldives relations demonstrate that India's soft power assets are a resilient force, capable of overcoming strains in strategic and diplomatic ties. This nuanced approach has played a significant role in mitigating strains in India-Maldives relations, positioning soft power diplomacy as a key instrument for fostering resilience in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics between India and Maldives.

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