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BALLOT BOX BOUNTY

WHY THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE IN THE MALDIVES MATTERS TO POWER COMPETITION IN SOUTH ASIA

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HOME to half a million people and measuring just 115 square miles of land distributed over nearly 1,200 inhabited and uninhabited islands, the Maldives is Asia's smallest country by both population and landmass. However, given its location a few hundred miles south-southwest of India – from where it overlooks some of the world's busiest sea lanes, which link resource and energy hungry Asian markets with the Middle East – the tiny island nation is of far greater geostrategic significance than its diminutive size might suggest. Accordingly, the history of these islands has been shaped to a great extent by powerful empires that have recognised their significance and sought to exploit their strategic value. With China now actively attempting to secure greater control of the Indian Ocean region as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, India and

China are finding themselves jostling for influence in Malé, the country's densely populated capital, as part of the broader Sino-Indian competition for dominance in South Asia which is increasingly coming to structure the region politically.

While India has enjoyed a period of considerable influence since the Maldivian Democratic Party's Ibrahim Mohamed Solih replaced Abdulla Yameen's pro-China Progressive Party of Maldives, it now looks likely that the country is swinging away from its neighbour and back into China's orbit. Though Yameen was unable to stand for election due to his recent conviction on corruption charges, Mohamed Muizzu, Malé's popular Mayor, ran as the party's candidate and secured 46 per cent of the vote compared to Solih's 39 per cent. Although the Maldivian constitution requires a candidate to win an absolute majority to secure office, and otherwise mandates a runoff between the top

two candidates which, in this case, has been set for 30th September, Solih will likely struggle to close such a significant gap. Victory for Muizzu would therefore represent a significant opportunity for China to increase its influence and potentially its presence in India's backyard with security implications for New Delhi and therefore potential ramifications for Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy.

MALDIVES: THE TOLL GATE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN

The Indian Ocean has historically been criss-crossed by trade networks with commodities including spice, textiles, and gold being transported to markets across the region for several millennia. Today the ocean continues to be a congested body of water with around half of the world's container ships and over two-thirds of the world's crude oil shipments traversing its length and breadth annually. With countries across the region

invested in maintaining the safety of these vital sea lanes, questions of maritime security in the Indian Ocean have grown in prominence over the past two decades.

Given this emphasis on maritime security, the perceived geostrategic significance of the Maldives, along with other islands in the Indian Ocean region including the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka, has increased significantly over recent years. As sites for potential naval bases and dockyards, these islands could potentially provide an Indian Ocean power with the capabilities to secure its own sea lines of communication whilst gaining a strategic advantage in the region by enabling it to interfere with or else interdict the sea lines of competitors and potential adversaries. Accordingly, gaining influence over and access to these strategically located islands has become a high priority for powers in the region.

Among the powers in the Indian Ocean to place an emphasis on the security implications

of these island nations, China has emerged as one of the most proactive players in the region. Motivated in large part by a desire to secure access to the enormous quantities of Middle Eastern oil it relies upon to function, China has established fruitful bilateral relations with many of the littoral and island nations in the region under the banner of the Belt and Road Initiative. Among the island nations incorporated into the Belt and Road Initiative by China, Maldives has emerged as a particular priority. Consisting of more than 1,000 islands dispersed over 35,000 square miles of ocean, the island chain is frequently referred to as the toll gate of the Indian Ocean as some of the busiest sea lines of communication pass through it.

While many in Maldives have welcomed Chinese interest in the island nation, India views it as an incursion into its sphere of influence in South Asia. Though the sea lines of communication that run through the Maldives are of great significance to China, they are essential to India and account for an enormous

percentage of the country's external trade and energy imports. Accordingly, China's growing influence in the Maldives is seen by India as a significant threat to its national security.

INDIA FIRST OR INDIA OUT?

After gaining independence from Britain in 1965, Maldives and India forged decades of close relations based primarily on economic cooperation and integration. In times of political instability, such as the bloody coup attempt of 1988, Maldives relied on India to provide military assistance and when the island nation was decimated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, India immediately responded by assisting its neighbour by providing vital support, relief equipment, and medical supplies while simultaneously conducting domestic disaster relief efforts concentrated on Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which

were all severely affected by the tsunami as well.

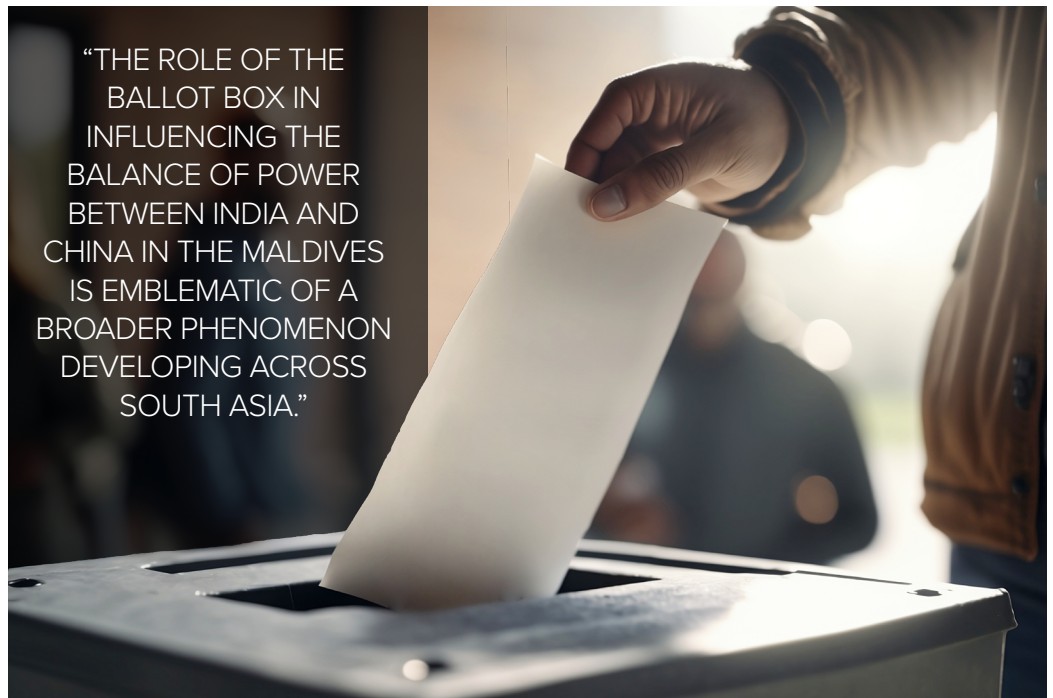
With the launch of China's Belt and Road Initiative, however, the island nation gained a new partner. Coinciding with the election of pro-China Yameen in 2013, the Maldives enthusiastically joined the scheme and following Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Malé in 2014, embarked on a range of large infrastructure projects including the Maldives-China Friendship Bridge (pictured) which, by the time



Picture: Ahmed Mansoor/unsplash

it was officially inaugurated in 2018, linked the islands of Malé, Hulhulé, and Hulhumalé.

Though Yameen's five-year term enabled China to gain unprecedented influence in Maldives, Solih's surprise success at the ballot box in 2018 paved the way for a period of renewed cooperation and engagement with India. With Maldives becoming major beneficiaries of India's re-commitment to its Neighbourhood First policy, Solih and the Maldivian Democratic Party instituted an India First policy reflecting what they saw as the nation's historic relationship with its closest ally and most important partner. The various bilateral initiatives and programmes launched by India and Maldives over the course of Solih's term as President include the redevelopment of Hanimaadhoo Airport, the construction of a new hospital on Hulhumalé, and the Greater Malé Connectivity Project. Officially launched in 2020, this project aims at connecting the islands of Malé, Villingili, Gulhifalhu, and Thilafushi by an over four-mile-long bridge and causeway funded by a \$100 million Indian grant, and a \$400 million line of credit. If Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives and its candidate for President, Mohamed Muizzu, are successful on 30th September, however, then it is very likely that the country will once again strengthen its relationship with China at the expense of India. Indeed, a key component of the campaign run by the Progressive Party of Maldives has been its India Out policy. Arguing that New Delhi's long-term influence over Malé is a threat to national independence, Muizzu and the Progressive Party of Maldives have played on popular anxieties over India's military presence on the island nation to stoke fears and apprehensions about a loss of Maldivian sovereignty. Pointing to greater cooperation between the two nations on issues of



national defence and maritime security, and especially the construction of a naval dockyard and harbour at Uthuru Thila Falhu, the Progressive Party of Maldives have argued that India is laying the groundwork for a permanent and large-scale naval presence on the strategically located island chain.

Further, apprehensions over India's military aspirations in the Maldives have combined with growing concerns in the country over the treatment of Muslims in India. With real and imagined reports of violence against Muslims appearing on social media platforms alongside accusations of complicity levelled at Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling BJP, anti-Indian sentiments have increased in the country to the benefit of the Progressive Party of Maldives in recent years.

Though Muizzu appears to have a commanding lead over Solih based on the results of the first round of votes, it is not impossible for this gap to be bridged. To do so, however, Solih will very likely have to gain the support of Mohamed Nasheed whose newly formed

party placed third in the first round of votes. Nasheed, himself a former President of Maldives, broke away from the Maldivian Democratic Party after being beaten by Solih in the presidential primary election held in early 2023, leading to a rancorous split that damaged the prospects of the party. Though Nasheed has openly criticised the stance taken by the Progressive Party of Maldives on China and other issues, early indications suggest that he would rather put his support behind Muizzu than reconciling with his former colleague and childhood friend.

INDO-CHINA COMPETITION AND THE POWER OF THE BALLOT BOX

The role of the ballot box in influencing the balance of power between India and China in the Maldives is emblematic of a broader phenomenon developing across South Asia. Both Nepal and Sri Lanka, for example, have followed a similar pattern to Maldives over recent years with a political revolving door which sees parties aligned with India periodically being replaced with those favouring closer ties to China. With Sri Lanka

preparing to hold an election in 2024 and the Nepalese coalition government appearing unstable, success for Muizzu on 30th September should not however be seen as an early indicator for a broader shift in favour of China in South Asia. The China-India divide is rather just one of several issues which affect the distinct domestic politics of each of these countries.

With this said, however, it is likely that the domestic politics of smaller South Asian countries will increasingly reflect geopolitical competition between India and China in the region. In Bangladesh, for example, the current divide between political elements identifying as pro-Indian and anti-Indian will very likely be replaced by pro-Indian and pro-Chinese factions as the stakes of major power competition in South Asia increase over the following decade. With China determined to replace India as the dominant power in South Asia as part of its broader objectives in the Indo-Pacific, greater diplomatic, economic, and security inducements will further polarise the politics of South Asia along this axis.