

---

## **The USA, China and Indian Triangular competition in Maldives**

---

**Shahadat Hossain<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*Maldives is an Island state of South Asia. this Muslim majority state is a popular tourist destination. Maldives economy is mostly dependent on tourism and fishing. Maldives is known as a peaceful state. Earlier it attracted the world's attention for climate vulnerability. But Now Maldives is a geostrategic ally important state. The world power the United States of America (USA), upcoming power China and regional power India has geopolitical interest in Maldives. So, these three states are seeking to increase their hegemony in Maldives. For that now Maldives is the battlefield of three powerful states: the USA, China and India. This paper explains it broadly.*

### **1. Introduction**

The Maldives is an island state in the Indian Ocean, and it's also considered as a south Asian state. Maldives is a member of the SAARC and RIM organizations. This state is around 2000 km away from India from Sri Lanka its distance is 983 km. Since Maldives' independence from British colonial rule, India has enjoyed good relations with the Maldives. However, the Indian army intervened in the Maldives in 1988. India has closed security and economic ties with India. But from the mid-2000s, Maldives started to move forward its footprint in China. After 2012 Sino- Maldives' engagement has dramatically changed. This relationship made India, and the USA concerned. This paper will explain why India and the USA were concerned about the Chinese presence in the Maldives. What are the interests of China, India and the USAs in the Maldives, and why is the Maldives a geostrategic ally important state?

---

<sup>1</sup> **Shahadat Hossain holds an MA in International Relations from South Asian University, New Delhi.**

This paper will explain the USA, China, and Indian triangular geopolitical dimension in the Maldives

**Methodology Data collection and analysis:** In this article I will emphasize on qualitative analysis. I want to do my research in the secondary data analysis process. The research will use secondary sources, such as books, research articles, documents, newspaper sources, data provided by national and international institutions, etc. Selection bias sometimes misleads the research. So, I will cross-check the data from different sources. Sharan B. Merriam (2009) discussed the limitations of data analysis. Most of the documents are not ready for research purposes, and the authenticity and accuracy of documents are also questionable (Merriam, 2015). So, I want to emphasize observation also.

**Conceptual framework:** Although Maldives is an Island state but for its geostrategic position its importance increased to powerful states day by day. To control Indian ocean maritime geopolitics, it's important to have a hegemonic presence and influence in Maldives. As a neighbour India enjoyed a close ally with Maldives. But Chinese presence in Maldives made India and the USA concerned. In recent decades the three powerful states of the world, the USA, China and India are in competition in Maldives to expand their hegemony and influence Maldives policy in terms of their interest. Triangle competition of these states in Maldives is making Maldives domestic and geopolitics crucial. This paper will explain Maldives geopolitical limitation and advantage and competition of interested states.

Firstly, in this paper I will explain Maldives' geopolitical features, for which reasons powerful states are becoming interested in Maldives. Then I will discuss the domestic political equation and consequences, and will focus on how the USA, India and China were involved in the political change of Maldives. How regime change of Maldives benefited the USA, India and China in different times. My research will focus on the timeframe from 2011-2020.

## **2. Maldives and its ally:**

It's difficult to recognize one state as small or big; there is no exact definition of a small or big state. But by some common features like geography, population, land, ocean, and GDP, we can consider one state big or small. The Maldives has 1192 islands where land area is only 300 square kilometres, but Maldives' whole land, including the coastal area, is 115,300 square kilometres.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) increased the importance of small islands. According to the UNCLOS agreement, 12 Nautical miles (22km) from the territorial sea has the sovereignty of the state, and here state can impose taxes, customs, and others. 200 (370 km) nautical miles from the territorial state has rights over all natural resources of the sea like fish, oil, and gas. When UNCLOS identified the economic zone sovereignty for small islands over the ocean, small island states got huge ocean areas over their control. The Maldives has economic sovereignty over the 929,400 kilometres of ocean land, and this is a huge area. The GDP of Maldives was 5.7 billion USD in 2019 (International Monetary Fund, 2019). The population of Maldives is 5,50,000. Although the Maldives has a huge ocean sovereign area for GDP, population, and land, it is considered a small state in South Asia. Although for its strategic location and position, its importance to powerful states is increasing day by day.

If you explore the importance of Maldives, we have to explore its geo-location. The Maldives is in the Indian ocean. The Indian Ocean is one of the most important oceans and critical waterways of the world. The importance of the Indian Ocean increased the importance the sovereign Maldives. In the 19th century, Britain dominated this region; after the collapse of Britain's world status, the US and USSR tried to increase their hegemony in the Indian ocean, especially during the cold war. Now India, China, and the USA are the most influential power in the Indian ocean.

Indian ocean located to Indian close-down, In Indian ocean Maldives sovereignty and its independent foreign policy matter of Indian security concern. Both India and the Maldives favoured a Zone of Peace (ZOP) in the Indian ocean, and this is not linkage to the USA (Kumar, 2012, p.

277). The USA is strategically more organized in the Indian ocean. US military base Diego Garcia in the Indian ocean is the base point of US strategy in the Indian ocean. On the other hand, China worried about the strait of Malacca's dilemma. Most of the Chinese oil is imported through the Malacca Strait. Malacca is the US control choke point in the Indian ocean. These three states' comparative competition in the Indian ocean increases the importance of the Indian ocean's small sovereign islands like Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. While the USA was busy fighting with OSAMA BIN LADEN in Afghanistan, China increased its strategic partnership with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and other Indian ocean states. China forwarded to the Indian ocean with its strategy `string of pearls.

The Gan Island of Maldives, where the British airbase was, also increased its importance to world domination states. During the cold war, the Maldives advocated itself as a non-alignment state. In 1977 the Soviet Union requested the Maldives to rent this island for 1 million US dollars, but the Maldives denied it (Kumar, 2012, p. 279). However, in 2005 India articulated the 'India first' policy. The Maldives articulated relations with India for security and defence purposes (Zahir, 2021, p.79). But the PPM ( a pro- Chinese political party) practiced pro-Chinese foreign policy during their power from 2013-to 2018. During that time Maldives president Abdullah Yeamin, signed BRI a strategic agreement with China. Denied to continue security dialogue with India

**Politics of Maldives:** There are two major political parties in the Maldives, and one is the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP); another is the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). After the political reform of Maldives in 2008, these two major political has been dominated Maldives politics. MDP is known as a pro-western and pro-Indian political party, where PPM is considered as a pro-Chinese political party in the Maldives.

**Political turmoil in the Maldives:** In 2011 when Mohammad Nasheed, a pro-Indian politician from Maldives, was in power, he selected an Indian company for the development and maintenance of the international airport of Maldives. But for choosing an Indian company, he faced people's protests, which protest mainly led to his resignation in 2012 (Zahir, 2021, p. 90). In the next election of Maldives in 2013, the

pro-Chinese political party PPM came into power. After the power change, Mohammad Nasheed was charged with corruption. But in 2018, a political turmoil took place in Male. The Supreme court made a decision to free Mohammed Nasheed. But a new court issued a new order overtaking the previous one. During that situation, MDP, the party of Mohammed Nasheed, urged for Indian intervention in the Maldives, even though they urged India to intervene militarily if necessary (Zahir, 2021, p.88).

That was the most crucial moment in Maldives politics. The United States of America also issued a statement warning the government not to overtake the supreme court decision in favour of new Delhi (US mission to Maldives, 2018). Counter to the USA and India, Beijing warned against external intervention in Maldives' domestic politics (WION, 2018). But after all, in the next election pro-Indian political party MDP has come into power. After coming in power, they made some changes and some foreign decisions in favour of the USA and India. In 2018's political, it was clear that Maldives, China, the USA, and India have geopolitical interests, and they made clear their stand in their statement.

**Maldives engagement with China:** China executing its foreign policy to other states is a non-interference policy, but from 2012-to 2018, its engagement in the Maldives grew rapidly with a geopolitical and geoeconomics agenda. To explain Sino- Maldives relations, we should broadly explain these time period relations.

1998-2008 the Chinese market constituted a mere 1% of tourist arrivals, while between 2009-2013, it was 21% (Adam & Nizar, 2013). Maldives signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with China in 2017, which was the first FTA agreement of the Maldives with any foreign state (Zahir, 2021, p. 82). In 2018 China was the largest exporter to the Maldives, the value was 488 million USD, and it was 16.5% of Maldives' total imports (Zahir, 2021, p. 83). China received its first Chinese loan in 2010, valued at around USD 74 million, for the public housing sector (Ministry of Finance and Treasury August 2020). Not only the housing sector, but China is also now involved in many other sectors and projects like the cross-sea China- Maldives friendship bridge, the international airport on hulhumale island, road projects, and 700 housing units.

Chinese companies have already invested in the resort sector in 7 islands in the Maldives. In 2019 the Chinese loan in the Maldives stood at 1.5 billion USD, which is 52% of its total external debt and 26% of the whole GDP (Zahir, 2021, p. 83). China established a joint ocean observation in 2017, and India was concerned it could be for military purposes (Ranjan, 2020). Every Chinese engagement in the Maldives is considered part of the Chinese 'string of pearls.'

China not only invested in a megaproject, but it also started sharing a large number of tourists from China. The Maldives is mostly dependent on the tourism sector. In 2015 Abdullah Yemen's government approved a foreign land ownership law. According to this law, foreigners can buy land and islands from the Maldives (BBC, 2015). This law favoured the Chinese businessman in the Maldives. Now Chinese investors are investing in at least seven important islands in the Maldives. Now the Maldives has become a potential destination for Chinese traders. China is engaging in the Maldives with other sectors also as well as a foreign ministry building the Maldives is also building a museum in the Maldives. China also provided assistance to the Maldives in the Tsunami crisis of 2004 (Kumar, 2012, p. 281).

In February 2018, during political turmoil in the Maldives, it was alleged that the Chinese naval fleet was on the south Asian territory of the Indian ocean (Rasheed, 2019, p. 02). In February 2018, when the Maldives was facing a political crisis on the supreme court order. With this crisis, geopolitics is merely related. It was a rumour that the Chinese navy was in the Indian ocean to intervene in Maldives' political crisis.

Mohammad Nasheed, current adviser of the ruling government, said that 'we are at a loss to understand how much we really owe to China, direct debit to direct the bilateral government to government debt is one thing, but there is on top of those sovereign guarantees for the private sectors ((Rasheed, 2019, p.02).

**Maldives' engagement with India:** From 2013-to 2018, India experienced a political turmoil and security dilemma for the Maldives. India was concerned about the Chinese geoeconomics presence in the Maldives. Abdullah Yeamin's policy was not balanced; his policy was morally pro-Chinese policy. In 2018 during progressive the party of

Maldives (PPM) power, Maldives refused to renew some number of Indian military personnel's visas. The Maldives as well as refused to take two helicopters from India as a gift.

After coming into power, the MDP party renewed Indian military personnel's visas, renewed the documents to keep two Indian helicopters, and renewed the annual Indo-Maldives Defense Cooperation Dialogue ((Zahir, 2021, p.89). India influenced Sino- Maldives relations and resumed Maldives `India first' policy after Abdullah Mohd Salih came to power in November 2018. Salih withdrew China from the first priority policy. New Delhi proposed to establish a 25-bed hospital and wanted to establish a network of ground radar in #2Maldives linked with the Indian coastal command (Kumar, 2012, p. 285). The new government of Maldives India announced a 1.4 billion USD financial package as debt and as well as aid. India proposed a 500 million USD loan to build a 6.7 km long bridge to link the capital city to Male to nearly three other important islands and build a port in Gulhifalhu (Ranjan, 2020). These economic and infrastructure projects were to counter Chinese geoeconomics and infrastructure engagement in the Maldives.

**Maldives' engagement with the USA:** The United States does not have any permanent embassy in the Maldives. The United States already has a key military base in Diego Garcia, which is about 1,170 km south of the Maldives ((Zahir, 2021, p. 80). So, the United States has strategic importance to the Maldives. When the Maldives was foot forwarding to China, it was becoming a security concern to the USA and USA's military base in the Indian ocean.

Maldives is closed major sea lines of communication (SLOC); through this line, most south, southeast, east Asia, and West Asian states pass their oil and other trade goods. It was accused that some Maldivian were involved with AL Qaeda, for that Maldives was also a state of risk for privacy and sea line security. The even Maldives has control over the huge space economic zone in the Indian ocean. To include this space, Maldives has sovereignty over the Indian ocean.

In the last decade, The Trump administration was committed to a free and open Indo- pacific. Maldives is one of the important islands of the US Indo-pacific strategy. Surprisingly in 2020, Male, under a new

government regime, declared that the endorsed US-led Indo-pacific strategy and signed a defence treaty with the US during the visit of US defence secretary Mike Pompeo in the Maldives on September 10, 2020, the United States deputy assistant secretary of defence for south and southeast Asia, Reed Werner, and the Maldivian Minister of Defence Mariya Didi signed a framework for a defence and security relationship between the two states (Chaudhury, 2020, p. 1). On the other side, in 2017, Maldives signed BRI and FTA with China also. In the counter to these treaties, China delayed its land to Chinese projects.

**Three states triangular competition:** Small states' sovereignty and independence foreign policy are always security concerns for powerful states. When powerful states design their strategy, they also keep in mind small neighbourhood states' policies. Powerful states are always trying to impose their hegemony on small states in terms of their strategy. For its geolocation, the Maldives is a very strategic state to India, China, and the USA. In terms of India, China, and the USA's geographical land, the Maldives is such a small island, but no one can ignore Maldives' voice as a sovereign state. For that, India always has a close eye on the Maldives. Geoeconomics is one of the pillars of Chinese foreign policy in South Asia. As an economic power, it is easy for China to increase its economic engagement with any state. China forwarded Maldives with its BRI agenda. Sometimes China's economic agenda served as geoeconomics policy. Geoeconomics agenda of China to the Maldives made worry to India and USA. For that, they influenced the political crisis of 2018. Even China also tried to take advantage of this crisis. However, when the pro-Indian government came into power in 2018, India and the USA got safe from Maldives' foreign policy. The two states signed a security and economic treaty with the Maldives. Here three states compete for who will influence Maldives' foreign policy in terms of their interest. Change of regime helped India and the USA. Those big states are often interested in small third-world states' domestic politics. If they can influence domestic policy, they can get a chance to influence foreign policy. Although the Maldives is a small island state in the Indian ocean, for its geolocation and geostrategic importance, it became a battlefield of three significant and influential states' hegemonic power.

**Theoretical explanation of Maldives crisis:** Changing pattern of Maldives' foreign policy is not enough to explain through neo-realism



and neo-liberalism policy. Small states' independent foreign policy is influenced by big states' military and strategic interests. The regional policy of Maldives was a matter of concern to India and China. The Maldives is trying to keep a balanced relationship with India, China, and the United States of America. But The Maldives has been used by major powers in the past.

Here the Maldives crisis should be explored with constructivism theory. Constructivism is a theory in international relations that is socially constructed. According to constructivism theory, state interest, friend, and enemy are all socially constructed. One of the constructive theorists, Alexander Wendt, said, '500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons (Wendt, 1995). Because the British are the friends of the US and North Korea is the enemy of the US. Constructivism theory primarily discusses how a state is constructed as an enemy or friend. The Maldives has been a friendly state to India since its independence. But when the Chinese presence increased in the Maldives, it became a security concern to New Delhi. The state is a constraint, but its policy is not; state constructivist policy recommends it is an enemy state or friend state.

Stephen Krasner sees the state interest from a realist perspective; according to him, 'individual rulers present as the national interest the policies they believe will ensure their survivals as rulers, (Krasner, 1999). So, states' interests may change according to the ruler's ideas. Ideas and practices may vary over time and space. In the Maldives in 2013-2018, Abdullah Yeamin was the president of his opposition party, MDP, which is a pro-western and pro-Indian political party. To counter MDP, Abdullah Yeamin moves its foreign policy towards China. Pro Chinese foreign policy of Maldives made India and the US concerned about their Indian ocean strategy. So, regime policy and ideas also matter in international politics. In 2018 government changed in the Maldives. Abdullah Mohammad Saleh from the MDP party became president. He changed Maldives' foreign policy. They are engaged closely with India and USA. Then India and USA consider the Maldives as a friendly state to them. Regime policy here changes the Indian and USA perspective.

### **3. Conclusion**

As the Maldives is a small land, it has geostrategic importance. Many features of Maldives increased its importance. So big states keep close eyes on Maldives politics. They influenced Maldives' domestic policy, politics, and economics. Big states keep close eyes on Maldives' security and defense policy. The maritime border states like the Maldives have significant importance in international politics and trade. In maritime geopolitics, small states have great importance; the Maldives is a state like that. So, USA, China, and India have competition in the Maldives to impose their hegemony. They practice hegemony with geoeconomics, soft power diplomacy, and trade engagement. Three big state competitions influence Maldives' domestic policy and politics also. Even Maldives has to live with a critical balance with India, China, and the USA.

### **Bibliography**

- Adam, A. &. (2013). *Changing dynamics in the tourism industry and average stay*. Maldivian Monetary Authority .
- BBC. (2015, July 13). *Maldives foreign land ownership reform bill is approved*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33638516>
- Chaudhury, S. R. (2020). The United states- Maldives Defence Relationship: Exploring strategic Dimension . *Centre for Air Power Studies* , 1-5.
- International Monetary Fund (2019). *World Economic outlook database* . Retrieved from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/02/weodata/index.aspx>
- Kumar, A. (2012). Chinese Engagement with the Maldives: Impact on Security Environment in the Indian Ocean Region. *Strategic Analysis*, 276-288.
- Maldives, U. m. (2018, February 02). *Maldives Court Ruling to Free Opposition Politicians*. Retrieved from <https://mv.usmission.gov/maldives-court-ruling-free-opposition-politicians/>
- Merriam, S. B. (2015). Revised and Expanded from Qualitative Research and Case study Application in Education . In E. J. Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and*

- Implementation, 4th Edition* (pp. 139-163). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ranjan, A. A. (2020). *Financing the connectivity project: A new milestone in India- Maldives relations*. Retrieved from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/financing-the-connectivity-project-a-new-milestone-in-india-%C2%AD%E2%80%90maldives-relations/>
- Rasheed, A. A. (2019). Can the Maldives steer Regional Power Politics . *E-International Relations* , 1-6.
- Ministry of Treasury,(2020). *Active External loans*. . Male: Ministry of Finance and Treasury .
- Wendt, A. (1995). Constructing International Politics. *International security* , 71-81.
- WION. ( 2018, February 07). *China warns against military intervention in Maldives*. Retrieved from <https://www.wionews.com/:https://www.wionews.com/india-news/china-warns-against-military-intervention-in-maldives-32108>
- Zahir, A. (2021). India and China rivalry in the Indian ocean: emergence of a new Indo-Maldivic strategic dynamic. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 78-95.

