

The Maldives Conundrum: India's Ally or China's Strategic Partner?

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Executive Summary

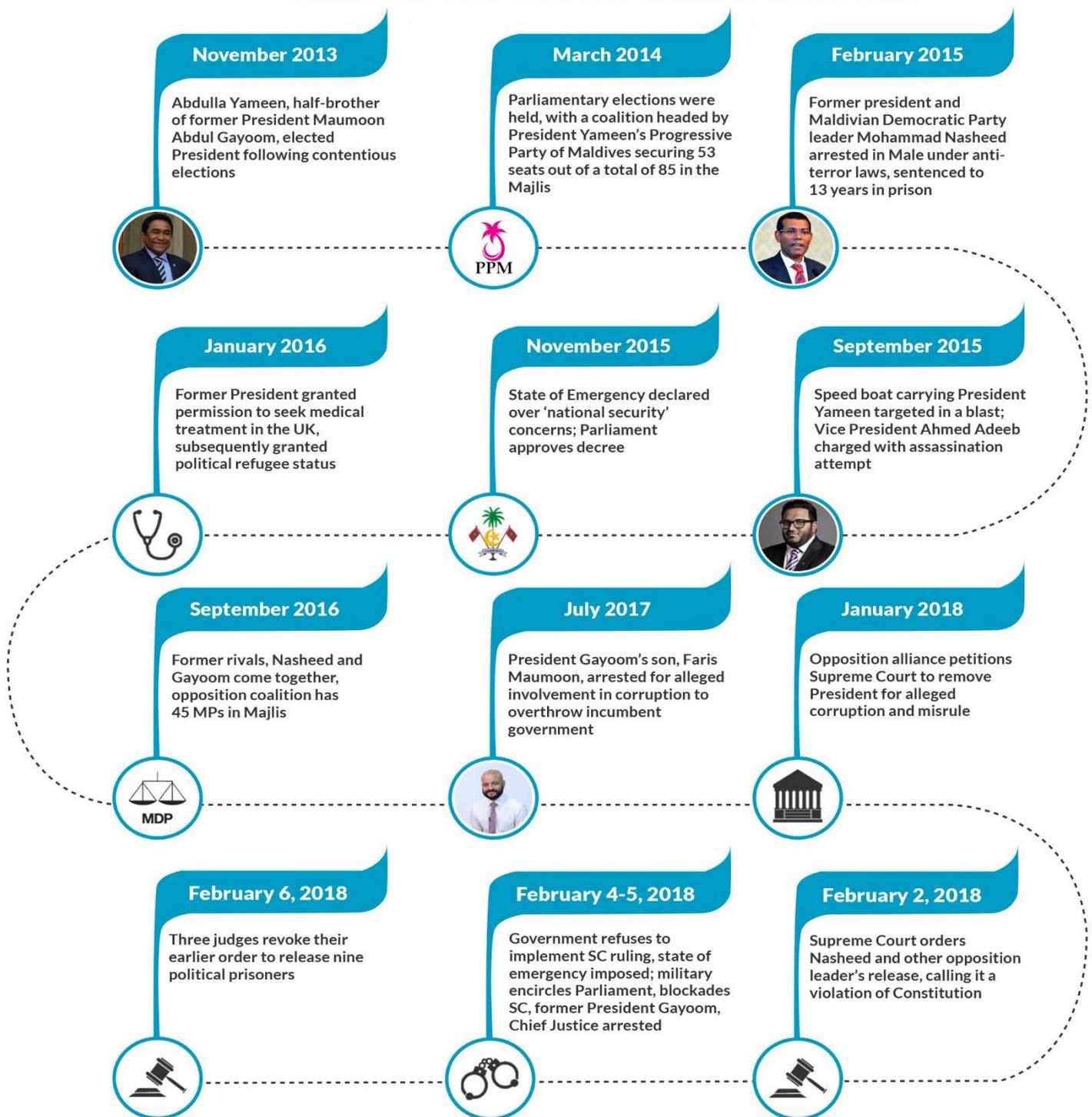
The US, UK, India and China have issued travel advisories over the past few days against traveling to the picturesque archipelago of Maldives due to the ongoing political crisis in the country. Maldives, a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is geographically proximate to neighbouring Sri Lanka and India. Tourism constitutes the second-largest revenue generating industry in the country after fishing. In that context, what are the factors that precipitated immediate travel warnings from all these countries? Is it a protracted situation that has come to a head in the Maldives and who are the actors that are perpetuating or mitigating the current crisis in the country? Are extra-regional powers responsible for the political turmoil and what role will they play in dealing with the political situation? It is significant to understand these questions to assess the short- and long-term scenarios for the country and the geopolitical relevance of such a forecast.

The political crisis in the Indian Ocean archipelago is hardly a new phenomenon. The country has been embroiled in a series of regime changes, with the incumbent government being elected following contentious elections that were held in November 2013. The election of President Abdulla Yameen of the Progressive Party of Maldives precipitated the eventual arrest of President Mohammad Nasheed on alleged charges of terrorism in 2015, thus curtailing the significance and relevance of the country's political opposition. Nasheed's arrest and subsequent sentencing was followed by the arrest and convictions of various opposition leaders in the country, in a way setting the pace for President Yameen's consolidation of power in the country. Due to the geostrategic significance of the tiny island nation in the Indian Ocean Region and its proximity to key shipping lanes in the region, Maldives has been a considerable variable in Indian foreign policy. With the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and its need to secure important sea lanes along the IOR, China has increasingly expressed interest in developing a strategic alliance with the country in recent years.

Taking into account the traditional perception of India as a regional 'big brother' and the economic outreach from China over the past few years, Maldives has ostensibly made a

shift in its foreign policy under the incumbent president. With the current political crisis in the nation and President Yameen’s continued attempt to hold on to power, the island nation has become a significant proxy for the India-China power struggle to play out, especially given the country’s very close proximity to India’ territory. Overall, the political crisis, its fallout and international responses can largely be perceived as largely shaping the geopolitics of the region over the coming months.

Timeline of Political Crisis in Maldives



Political Turmoil in Maldives: Relevant Actors

On February 1, the Supreme Court of Maldives ordered the release of at least nine opposition leaders, including in-exile former President Mohammad Nasheed, after calling the charges and convictions politically motivated. The five-judge bench of the Supreme Court also ordered the government to reinstate the 12 legislators from President Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives who had been sacked for their defection. The developments effectively gave the opposition coalition headed by Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) a majority in the 85-seat Maldivian Majlis (Parliament). President Yameen subsequently ordered the arrest of Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, top court judge Ali Hameed and the chief judicial administrator and a former President and his half-brother while also declaring a 15-day state of emergency over 'national security' reasons. The proceedings of the Parliament, which were due to start on February 5, were indefinitely suspended, allegedly over the fear of impeachment proceedings possibly being initiated by the opposition against President Yameen. The Supreme Court, with the three remaining judges on the bench who are free, issued an order rescinding its earlier decision on overturning the convictions of the nine opposition leaders.

Various internal and external actors have had the power and continue to wield the power to be effective catalysts in the political crisis. The ongoing political crisis has conspicuously highlighted that the incumbent President Yameen is strategically pitting the country amid the regional power rivalry between India and China. This is especially evident when considering the fact that President Yameen dispatched envoys to 'friendly nations' of China, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on February 7. With former President Nasheed appealing to the Indian government for a military intervention to resolve the ongoing crisis in the country, the developments have effectively placed the two great powers on opposite sides of the political spectrum, thus tacitly facilitating their rivalling positions. While President Yameen and Nasheed attempting to be the architects of a new narrative in the country, other actors that are peripheral but hold a sustained sway in the country's future can be the country's Supreme Court, India, China and also the country's security forces. While India and China have roles based on their geopolitical

roles, other internal actors that could essentially shape the country's politics are the Supreme Court and the country's security forces.

Keeping in mind that the current political crisis was precipitated after the Supreme Court's order that effectively took a line antagonistic to that of the incumbent government, the top court's role in maintaining the checks and balances of the current Legislature and executive of the country is underscored. However, with three judges subsequently toeing the political line drawn by President Yameen, as evidenced by the February 7 order, the political influence on the country's judiciary is apparent. Given that the Judiciary is perceived to be the institution safeguarding Constitutional values, any decision is likely to carry significant legitimate weight. While President Yameen is likely to use that factor over the coming days to legitimise his moves, should the Judiciary express its independence and reveal political pressure, it can be a significant factor galvanizing anti-government public opinion.

The recent arrests of the Supreme Court Justices, as well as the former President and the chief of the police forces, signify the current support enjoyed by the incumbent President from the security forces of the country. In the absence of such support for the President to enforce actions to crackdown on the opposition, in case an open rebellion by the country's security forces, the political dynamics may witness a shift in the near future. Furthermore, given the widespread disenchantment among the population against the incumbent government, security forces refusal to comply with the government's order may receive public support, thus incentivising a rebellion by the powerful forces to reinstate democratic rule in the country.

India has had a historical connection with Maldives and political turmoil in the country. In 1988, at the behest of the then-President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Indian government dispatched troops to the country to quash an attempted coup by a rebel group aided by mercenaries of Sri Lankan Tamils. In that sense, India's response to the crisis has been closely monitored, especially also considering the fact that New Delhi has always maintained restraint with regard to political or military interventions in other nations. With China having significant contributions in the infrastructural development

of Maldives in recent times, coupled with sizeable revenue of the country being derived from Chinese sources, Maldives' economic dependence on China makes the country an effective actor with a say in the political machinations of Male.

Despite the internal actors, two significant players who are likely to be architects of the country's political future are India and China with external pressure and smart manoeuvring shaping the country's future. It is necessary to understand why and how these actors would come to play the role that global powers are eagerly watching will play out in the Indian Ocean Region.



Maldivian Law Enforcement Forces forcefully disperse protestors

Maldives: India's historical ally and China's strategic partner in IOR

With its over 1.3 billion population, a trillion-dollar economy and the large territorial mass, India holds considerable clout as a regional power to reckon with at least in South Asia. This has made the country the umbrella power for many small nations within its geography, including Maldives. Maldives and Sri Lanka hold strategic significance by being along one of the busiest Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOC's) in the world. In that sense, India's relations with both the countries have held geopolitical significance. Another factor that holds tacit but extreme significance is the cultural similarities shared by these countries with India.

With a diaspora of over 25,000 people among a population of only 0.4 million, New Delhi has quite the stakes in maintaining stability in Male. Furthermore, the affinity of the population due to Indian contributions in infrastructure- building such as hospitals and educational institutions, as well as the relief aid during the 2004 Tsunami established New Delhi as the regional ally for Maldives. The crackdown on opposition leaders, including former President Nasheed, saw the latter appeal to New Delhi to intervene in the country's politics to 'restore' Democracy in the country. Incidentally, three members of local political body were suspended in December allegedly over their meeting with the Indian Ambassador to Maldives, Akhilesh Mishra. Considering all of these factors, how has New Delhi sought to react to the current political crisis?

On February 6, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) through a statement appealed for the 'spirit of democracy and the rule of law' to prevail in Maldives. The statement also called for the Yameen government to respect the Supreme Court's earlier order to release the political prisoners. Furthermore, New Delhi issued a travel advisory urging against all non-essential travel to the island nation amid the political crisis. The statement ostensibly did not address former President Nasheed's appeal to New Delhi to militarily intervene for the resolution of the crisis. India's restrained response is characteristic of New Delhi's avoidance of any intervention in the political matters of a sovereign nation. One of the significant departures from the 1988 military intervention

and the current crisis is that the former intervention was triggered after then-President Gayoom's request to New Delhi. Keeping in mind President Yameen's traditional allegiance to Beijing, New Delhi's restraint can be attributed to the consideration that Yameen may use any intervention by New Delhi to mobilise sympathetic public opinion for him. Moreover, one of the other aspects that will have a role to play in New Delhi's response can be perceived to be Beijing's interest in Maldives. What are the reasons for China's interest in a country that does not really lie in its 'sphere of influence'?

China, notably, did not host an embassy in Maldives until 2011 and the littoral country only started featuring a significant position in Beijing's foreign policy after President Xi's visit in 2014 to the country. The country's importance multiplied over Male's potential role in the realisation of President Jinping's characteristic Belt and Road Initiative. With China's increased role in infrastructure-building in the country with the notable Friendship bridge, coupled with the contribution to the country's tourism revenue as Chinese constitute the largest number of tourists to the country, the island nation has increasingly become economically reliant on Beijing. Furthermore, the Free Trade Agreement signed between the two countries in December 2017 effectively made the economic interdependence more pronounced. Given President Yameen's notable inclination toward Beijing's role in the country, as well as perceived support for his power consolidation, what role does Beijing seek to play in the country's ongoing crisis?

One of the most notable responses from Beijing to the political turmoil was a sternly worded editorial piece in one of the state media mouthpiece of Global Times that was published on February 6. The editorial, while stating India's alleged desire to control South Asian politics, opposed any intervention by New Delhi in Male's politics. While calling for 'dialogue and consultation' to resolve the current crisis, Beijing has also underscored the necessity for 'non-interference from third parties'. In a press statement, the spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry called the ongoing crisis as part of the 'internal affairs' of a country and called upon external actors to respect the country's sovereignty while not 'complicating the situation'. The most significant aspect of Beijing's response has been the critical perception of any potential role of New Delhi in any regime change in the country. By invoking the aspects of sovereignty and

territorial integrity of Maldives, Beijing's likely strategic aim was to undermine any greater role played by New Delhi in resolving the crisis. By tacitly placing the economic and military might behind the incumbent President, Beijing has likely engendered a situation wherein India's stance is likely to be extra-cautious with regard to Maldives. Given that Male may just become the battleground for regional power politics to play out and with both nations having a relatively assertive leadership at the helm, the coming days may pave the way for the perception of the scope of influence each country has in the region.



President Abdulla Yameen during his visit to New Delhi in April 2016



China- Maldives signing the Free Trade Agreement in December 2017

Evolving Contours of China-Maldives-India Relations



India - Maldives Relations



Comprehensive Trade Agreement in 1986

Operation Cactus

Indian military intervention to quash coup attempt following President Gayoom's request in 1988



Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH), Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET) in Male constructed with **Indian aid**

Primary **relief aid** provided by New Delhi following 2004 Tsunami



Indians - second largest **Expatriate community** in Maldives

US\$100 million

Stand-by Credit facility (SCF) to Maldives, Agreement signed with India's GMR infrastructure worth **511 million USD** for upgrading Male airport terminated in November 2012



MEA demands Yameen to **step down** in February and abide by SC ruling

China - Maldives Relations

President Xi visits Maldives in September 2014



Contract for upgradation of Male airport awarded to state-owned Chinese company in 2014

Funding of **Male-Hulhule Friendship Bridge**; 1,000-apartment **housing project** on Hulhumale



Free Trade Agreement between Maldives, China allows **zero-tariff** on over **96 percent** of products

Over 70 percent of country's **debt** believed to be **owned by China**



Chinese constitute largest number of **tourist population** in Maldives

Likely Scenarios: Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance

New Delhi's incumbent government has shown increased interest in expanding his influential role in the Indian Ocean region as well as toward its Eastern neighbours. Furthermore, with the United States perceiving India as an effective counter-weight to China's rise and economic outreach in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions, India likely aims to strengthen its neighborhood policy now more than ever. In such a case, what are the likely scenarios that may see New Delhi's discernible manoeuvres in engendering Maldives' political stability in the near-term?

While the proximate nature of Maldives' geography may be a very significant reason prompting New Delhi's response, India is likely to continue to push for diplomatic pressure and negotiations as a way for the resolution of the ongoing crisis. Particularly keeping in mind, the likely international backlash against an arbitrary military intervention, coupled with likely antagonistic public opinion in Maldives against New Delhi, such a move is unlikely to be considered as a response to the ongoing crisis, at least at this time. With that being said, given that there have been reports in the Indian media about troops possibly being on alert to respond to the crisis, what are the factors that may prompt such a response?

Taking into consideration the fact that New Delhi would under no circumstances want to alienate the public support from the people of Maldives, one of the primary factors that would come into play is the civilian demand for Indian intervention and nature of civil unrest in the country. The significant Indian diaspora in the country would also be a factor that would influence New Delhi's likely calculations precipitating intervention. Although former President Nasheed has increasingly voiced calls for New Delhi's intervention, the latter may not be influenced in the absence of a call for its increased role from a united front of the Opposition, as well as other influential actors of the country, including the media.

Furthermore, one of the most significant catalysts for effecting Indian intervention would be unequivocal international support for such a response in the near-term. Should Washington, Brussels, London and other significant actors encourage such a move, New Delhi is likely to project diplomatic support and legitimacy for such an intervention. Despite these factors, given precedence of India's role in such crises, New Delhi is likely to lean toward economic pressure, sanctions and diplomatic negotiations as the primary response toward resolving the crisis in the near-term.

While Beijing is likely to refrain from any direct intervention in the country's politics, continued backing for the incumbent President, especially if he promises his ability to consolidate power and maintain relatively positive public opinion, is likely to continue. With that being said, in case of increased international support for Indian intervention, Beijing may re-calibrate its position and not be overly critical of India's role in dealing with the crisis.

Given the general opposition to the President among the Maldivian population at this time, especially manifested in the form of the civil unrest that has been witnessed in the country recently, President Yameen may have to give in and hold elections at the earliest. Such elections are likely to be supervised by international monitoring agencies for being independent. Unless and until civil unrest escalates over the coming days, a significant watershed of international response is unlikely at this time, effectively maintaining the status-quo with regard to the situation.

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