

Indian Ocean As A Prize Or Crisis Of Multipolarity? China-India Rivalry Over Indian Ocean Islands

Part II

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There should be no doubt among objective observers that the assassination and violent coup plots in the Maldives are predicated on returning Nasheed to power, but the context behind these events extends well past the island chain and into the larger Indian Ocean region. It's plain to see that Nasheed himself could not manage such an operation on his own, let alone while currently sitting in a maximum security jail, so it's the foreign powers behind him that are really the ones guiding this operation. The personal history of the jailed former President confirms his closeness to the UK, and to a logical extension, the US, the latter of which is especially so when his Color Revolution-style of regime change tactics are compared with other American proxies across the globe such as Tymoshenko and Suu Kyi.

When piecing together the shadowy web of forces behind Nasheed's bloody comeback plans, one might be quick to overlook India, believing that its close strategic partnership with the Maldives has remained unchanged since Operation Cactus. That's not exactly the case, however, since the Maldives have moved radically in China's direction ever since Yameen's Presidency first began, and this has drawn serious concern among many in New Delhi.

There is nothing at the moment that openly links India to the violent regime change attempt being plotted in the Maldives, but if there's one country that would most directly benefit from the removal of a "pro-China" government there, then it would indisputably be India. It might be that the US and UK are conducting the ongoing operation on India's behalf, or possibly doing so as a preemptive "goodwill gesture" to 'prove their loyalty' to India in further wooing it into an overt anti-China geopolitical orientation, but whatever the motives behind what's really going on, it's easy to see that Yameen's assassination or overthrow would be to India's advantage at China's expense.

The People's (Republic of China) President

The Maldivian-Chinese Strategic Partnership:

Yameen earned the support of the people of the Maldives, and also the government of the People's Republic of China, through his accelerated partnership relations with Beijing. In the course of only two years, the Maldives have received so many soft loans and infrastructure investments (such as a bridge between the capital and the neighboring airport-hosting island) that the Foreign Minister [proclaimed](#) last month that "China is now one of the most

important development and trade partners of the Maldives” and that “The government of President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom is committed in expanding that partnership to new levels”. This was just a few days after the President [reiterated an earlier statement](#) from over the summer “that this government will not tolerate foreign parties to interfere with the country’s domestic issues”, just so happening to remind the world of this on the occasion of the Indian Foreign Minister’s visit on 11 October. Tellingly, Prime Minister Modi skipped the Maldives in March when he went on a tour of the Indian Ocean nations (to be described shortly), in what was [largely interpreted](#) as a snub against Yameen over Nasheed’s jailing, while President Xi [paid a visit there](#) half a year prior in September 2014.

Modi’s Motivation For Snubbing The Maldives:

✘ To put this into the perspective of Maldivian-Chinese relations, the island nation had [officially joined](#) the One Belt One Road (OBOR, or “New Silk Road”) project in December of 2014, thus becoming one of Beijing’s formal strategic partners. India is still somewhat suspicious of OBOR and remains uneasy over the ‘[String of Pearls](#)’ maritime relationships that China has made in the Indian Ocean over the past decade. The Maldives’ intensifying ties with China likely emboldened the government into rejecting Western pressure and going forward with Nasheed’s jailing, secure in the knowledge that no matter how the West diplomatically (or perhaps even economically) responds, the country will still prosper owing to its strategic partnership with China. Both of these factors (the Maldivian-Chinese Strategic Partnership and Nasheed’s jailing) seem to have been the real reasons why Modi skipped the Maldives on his Indian Ocean tour and deliberately snubbed its leadership.

One Thing Leads To Another:

Taking stock of India’s sudden change in attitude towards its neighbor and traditional partner, Yameen probably figured that with New Delhi already mad at him for what he perceived to be nothing more than pragmatic 21st-century economic diversification and domestic law enforcement, there was little he could do to repair the relationship short of rescinding his decisions on both matters, which he certainly wasn’t about to do. Thus, feeling bullied by his bigger ‘partner’, Yameen seems to have prioritized developing his country’s bilateral relations with China even further in an accelerated effort to hedge against what he feared might soon turn out to be an antagonistic former ally. Unintentionally, it might have been this very calculation, likely made in strategic-defensive self-interests and not with any proactive intent to aggravate India (but rather just to respond to the grand snub), which triggered alarm bells in India and deepened the security dilemma between New Delhi and Malé, but also indirectly between it and Beijing.

Land Law, Base Rumors, And Free Trade:

Proceeding forward with its partnership with Beijing, the Maldives enacted an [unprecedented land law](#) in late July that gave foreigners the right for the first time in history to own property in the country under certain conditions (\$1 billion must be invested and 70% of the territory must be reclaimed from the Indian Ocean). This was immediately met with criticism from [Indian voices](#) that suspected it could play to China’s strategic advantage, with [Asia Times](#) later writing that it offers the possibility of China opening up clandestine listening posts very close to India’s southern coast and giving it a central position in the Indian Ocean. The rumor mill eventually got so out of control at the time with all the talk of potential “Chinese bases” that both the [Maldives](#) and [China](#) had to publicly

reject the flurried speculation, although this doesn't seem to have allayed any of India or Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party's fears that China will soon be moving in to the island chain. About a month and a half later, fearlessly showing that they will not let foreign chatter interfere with their partnership, the Maldives and China signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) on 9 September that both sides will eventually move towards a free trade pact. Unsurprisingly in hindsight, Yameen was first targeted for assassination at the end of that month, and the country's drama has only increased since then.

India's Aspirations In Its Namesake Ocean

Grand Strategy:

✘ New Delhi feels that it alone should exercise hegemony over the Indian Ocean rimland, both in the strategic and commercial sense, and herein it comes into conflict with China's rising influence in the region. Theoretically, both Great Powers could peacefully cooperate in the region and don't necessarily have to compete, but the trust deficit between each of them naturally leads India into seeing the expanding Chinese presence as a sort of threat, and the moves it takes in response are inevitably interpreted by China as obstructive and unfriendly, albeit all in a proxy fashion of course. From India's standpoint, it needs to do everything it can to stop the 'String of Pearls' from turning into the New Silk Road's ports of call, and ideally replace China's presence with its own, if possible.

This zero-sum-game mentality precludes accepting any significant Chinese presence in India's namesake ocean, and it makes it an imperative of Indian foreign policy to push back wherever possible and via whatever escalatory means necessary (short of direct conflict) to change the strategic balance in such a way as to sabotage China's regional plans. Some outposts like the Pakistani port of Gwadar are impossible for India to shut down, but others, chiefly those in the Indian Ocean insular states, are 'fair game' and a lot more vulnerable and impressionable to New Delhi. Additionally, because the island ports by their very nature lay inside the ocean itself unlike their mainland counterparts, they provide an important point from which to project power along the sea lines of communication (SLOC) necessary for sustaining hegemony in the wider region.

Insular Interests:

Understanding how integral of a role the insular island nations play in this pan-rimland 'Great Game' between India and China, Modi paid a landmark visit to the Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka in March of this year. The Diplomat's Darshana M. Baruah wrote a [very comprehensive overview](#) of the importance that each of these nations plus the Maldives have in the context of Beijing and New Delhi's rivalry, and it's highly recommended that the reader check out that article and the one he [wrote earlier](#) about the Eastern Indian Ocean islands to get a sense of the current state of play in these areas. To summarize, it's suspected that China has gained a foothold in Myanmar's Coco Islands, and together with its previous dominating influence in Sri Lanka (mildly on the decline since January's presidential election and which will be touched upon in Part III), the Maldives, and the anti-piracy refueling facility it received access to in the Seychelles, the 'String of Pearls' had begun to look a lot more like a 'naval noose' from the Indian perspective (especially if one includes Gwadar into this construction). Thus, it became necessary for India to send its top national representative to the region in order to make a strong symbolic stand and prove that New Delhi wasn't about to surrender its sensitive namesake region any time soon.

After Modi's trip, The Diplomat also [published](#) a detailed piece by SK Chatterji that reviewed all of its accomplishments, which in short were mostly of an economic and symbolic nature (as could have been expected). Modi's purposeful snubbing of the Maldives thus sticks out like the sore thumb that it was meant to be, and the political overtones were of course not lost on either Malé or Beijing. In fact, it almost looked as if Modi was signaling that the Seychelles and Mauritius were "in play" between the two rivals, that the Maldives had been "temporarily conceded" or put in a bratty position of 'time-out', and that Sri Lanka was a victory lap after the stunning loss of 'pro-Chinese' incumbent Rajapaksa. It's actually quite difficult for India's actions to be interpreted otherwise when placed in the larger context of Indian Ocean rivalry, especially, as mentioned, because of how politically focused his avoidance of the Maldives came off as being. To return to the concept of the naval noose that the author had introduced, the Sri Lankan 'knot' tying the Maldives and Myanmar together had been 'cut', the Maldives were being 'diplomatically scolded', and India was doubling down on its interests in the African-adjacent countries of Seychelles and Mauritius.

African Ambitions:

Modi's 'island hopping' took place concurrently with a [conference](#) in Bhubaneswar about the "Indian Ocean: Renewing the Maritime Trade and Civilisational Linkages", which concluded with the broad unveiling of an Indian-centric "Cotton Route" to challenge China's New Silk Road. While specific details were scarce, the author released his [own analysis](#) about what this could realistically entail, and a large portion of it deals with India's anticipated trade linkages with the growing East African economies. China's already embedded in this part of the world, and the New Silk Road [prominently features](#) this region in its strategic calculus, but if India could 'win out' over China in establishing premier influence over the Seychelles, then it would be in a position to influence China's SLOC and also establish its own for enhancing its commercial presence along the East African coast. In fact, if one looks at the East African market as the 'grand prize' in the Indian Ocean competition (which both Great Powers, but especially China, need to tap into for assured future growth), then the insular politicking between India and China makes a lot more sense. Neither may be able to stop the other, but they can try to 'one-up' their rival by laying strategic claim to the fixed number of 'real estate plots' scattered throughout the ocean.

[To be continued...](#)

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