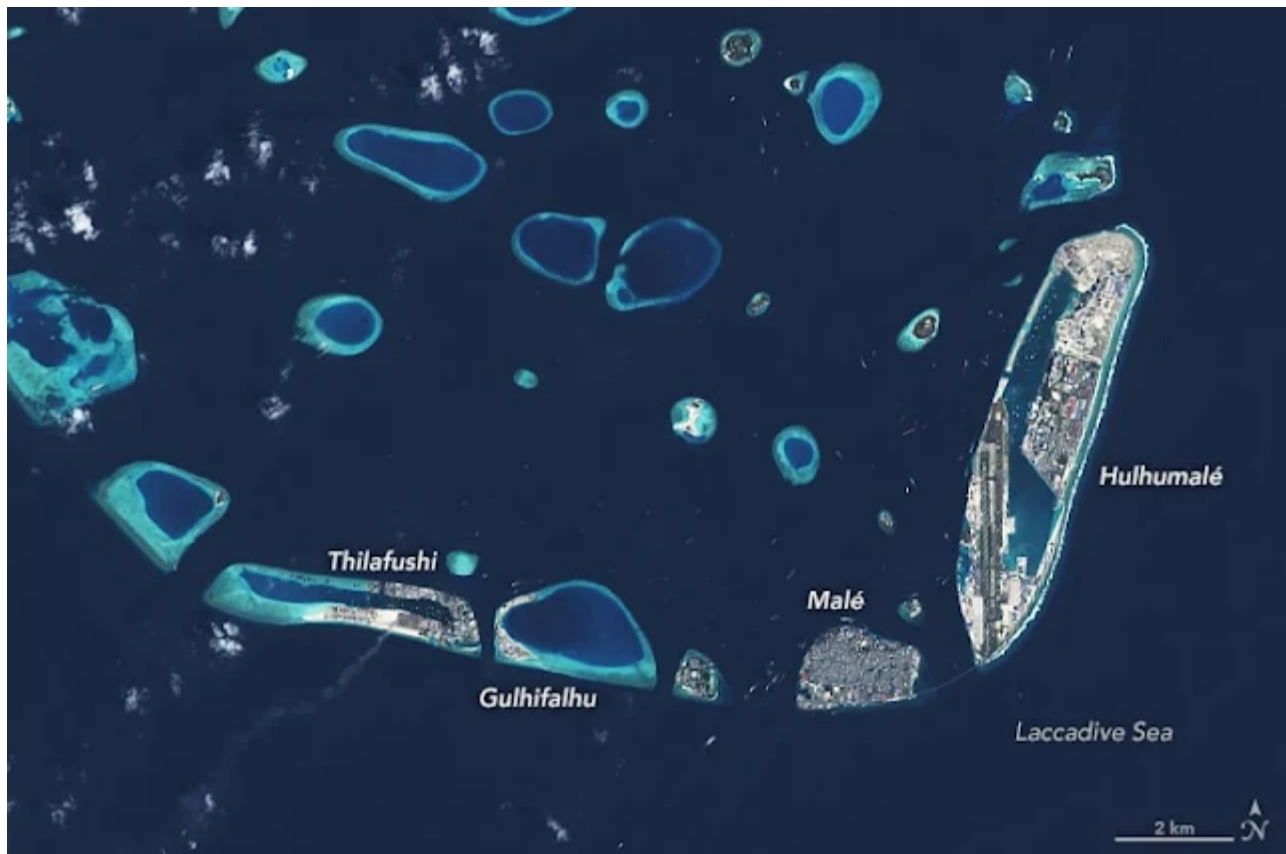


How Maldives is Becoming India's Cuba?

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Cover Image Attribute: The Maldives, February 19, 2020. Image taken by the NASA Earth Observatory's Lauren Dauphin, using Landsat data from the U.S. Geological Survey.

Examining the relationship dynamics between the Maldives and Cuba with their respective regional powers, India and the United States, presents an intriguing viewpoint worth delving into. It's essential to acknowledge that this perspective is subjective rather than an indisputable truth, leaving space for personal interpretation.

India and the Maldives boast a long-standing history of cultural, linguistic, and commercial ties dating back centuries, shaping their enduring relationship. Trade thrived between ancient India and the Maldives, with the Maldives playing a crucial role in the Indian Ocean spice trade. This exchange facilitated the flow of cultural and religious influences, including Buddhism and Hinduism, from India to the Maldives. Moreover, the Dhivehi language spoken in the Maldives and India's Lakshadweep Islands also shares Dravidian origins with South Indian languages, highlighting their common cultural heritage. Post-colonial ties further strengthened their bond, with India being among the first to recognize the Maldives' independence in 1965. Since then, the two nations have maintained a close partnership, collaborating on various fronts, such as security, trade, and development assistance. This historical connection parallels the relationship between Cuba and the United States, highlighting how deep-rooted historical ties can significantly influence diplomatic relations, economic interactions, and cultural exchanges between nations.

In current geopolitical dynamics, the drawing similarities between the strategic significance of the Maldives and Cuba cannot be overstated. During the Cold War, Cuba was of immense strategic importance to the United States, while the Maldives, situated in the Indian Ocean, holds a similar strategic value for India. Control or influence over these territories can profoundly affect regional power dynamics and geopolitical interests. Moreover, akin to Cuba's historical influence from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Maldives has recently become a battleground for influence between India and China. India views the Maldives as part of its sphere of influence due to proximity and historical ties, whereas Just like India, China has been bolstering its presence through various infrastructure projects and economic investments.

As we all know, "*Realism*," a prominent theory in international relations, underscores power as the primary force shaping state behavior. In this context, India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean may constrain the Maldives' capacity to forge independent alliances or pursue policies contrary to Indian security concerns. This notion resonates with the concept of a "*sphere of influence*," where a dominant state asserts control over neighboring regions.

If we look into the past, when Fidel Castro assumed power in 1959, the United States perceived Cuba as non-threatening. In fact, the **Library of Congress houses the documents of Philip Bonsal**, who served as the US ambassador to Cuba during the initial two years of Castro's regime. Bonsal's correspondences from Havana reveal the struggle among US officials to discern Castro's intentions following his rise to power. It soon became evident that the reforms pursued by Cuban revolutionaries would adversely affect US business interests on the island. This led to a series of escalating tensions, driving a wedge between the US and Cuban governments. Consequently, Castro sought support from the Soviet Union, the United States' foremost rival and adversary.

Cuba's alignment with the Soviet Union was the primary reason behind the US considering Castro a security threat—a concern that was arguably validated during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Additionally, US leaders viewed Cuba as a security threat due to Castro, Che Guevara, and other figures supporting and advocating for revolution across Latin America and Africa.

On the other hand, for years, India has served as a net security provider for the Maldives just like the United States provided such cover to Cuba from the 1898 Treaty of Paris to the final days of the Batista era. This relationship has been marked by a succession of agreements and tangible support on the ground in defense relations with Male. Since thwarting the 1988 coup attempt, India has maintained a consistent presence in the region, offering defense training, equipment, and assistance under a comprehensive **Action Plan for Defense signed in 2016**.

However, the election of pro-China Mohamed Mohammed Muizzu as the new Maldivian president presents a challenge for Indians. According to his election pledge, Muizzu aimed to push erstwhile President Abdulla Yameen's administration's anti-India objectives in fast-forward mode, starting with withdrawing Indian troops (numbering 77) from the archipelago and announcing a review of over 100+ agreements with India within the first 100 days of his presidency. Many of these promises have already been delivered or are in progress.

In January 2024, Muizzu embarked on a state visit to Beijing, where the two nations inked 20 agreements covering various areas such as infrastructure, trade, economy, green development, grants, and other developmental projects. Among these agreements is approximately \$127 million allocated for enhancing roads in the capital, Male, and constructing 30,000 social housing units, per a press release from the president's office. During his visit, **Muizzu lauded China** as *"one of the closest allies and developmental partners of Maldives."*

And, in early March 2024, the Maldivian government signed a **"military assistance" pact with China**, sparking concerns in Delhi. The Maldivian defense ministry stated that the agreement was *"gratis" (without payment)* but did not provide further details. During a public address, Muizzu mentioned that China would offer non-lethal weapons and train the Maldivian security forces (which had previously received training from both India and the US).

"This is unprecedented. It's the first time the Maldives has signed a defence agreement with Beijing to provide military assistance," remarked Azim Zahir, a Maldivian political analyst, **speaking to the BBC**. *"We knew that Mr Muizzu would forge closer ties with China in terms of investment and capital, but no one expected him to go to this extent,"*

How do we analyze Cuba's shift to the Soviet Union with the Maldives' shift to China?

Similarity in Sphere of Influence Doctrines

The United States regarded Cuba as within its sphere of influence in line with the **1823 Monroe Doctrine**, a foreign policy tenet asserting opposition to European interference in the Americas. The US perceived Castro's revolution and his alliance with the Soviet Union as challenging its hegemony in the area. In a parallel vein, the Modi administration's **2015 SAGAR Doctrine—Security and Growth for All in the Region**—serves as a term to delineate India's vision and geopolitical strategy for maritime collaboration in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including the Maldives as a key partner. Both doctrines incorporate a component of countering external powers that could potentially challenge their authority in their respective regions. Although not explicitly mentioning China, SAGAR, despite taking a more cooperative approach (compared with the Monroe Doctrine), can be interpreted as a reaction to China's expanding strategic and economic footprint in the Indian Ocean, which India may view as a threat.

Sovereignty Debate

Before the revolution, the United States had considerable economic and political influence on Cuba. American corporations possessed a substantial share of Cuban land and controlled a significant portion of the sugar production, which was integral to the Cuban economy and directly impacted the island nation's political landscape. This dominance generated discontent among Cubans, who perceived their country as lacking true independence. Similarly, in the Maldives, some have concerns about the Indian military presence and infrastructure initiatives like the **development of Addu Island**, fearing they compromise Maldives' sovereignty. Nonetheless, India asserts that its presence offers vital security advantages for the region.

Economic Reliance

Cuba's economy, heavily dependent on sugar exports, faced challenges due to the US embargo. In contrast, the Soviet Union provided support by agreeing to purchase Cuban sugar at fixed prices, serving as a vital economic lifeline for Cuba. Likewise, the Maldives relied heavily on tourism, with Indian tourists dominating arrivals until December 2023, when they were **overtaken by Chinese tourists** as the primary source of tourism by February 2024.

Also, due to its status as an island nation, the Maldives heavily relies on imports for various essentials. As a close neighbor, India has been a dependable supplier of these goods, ensuring their accessibility and affordability. But, in January 2024, China and the Maldives upgraded their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, sealing 20 pivotal agreements. While covering diverse areas such as disaster risk reduction,

blue economy, and digital economy investment, the spotlight remained on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between the Maldives and China in 2014. President Mohamed Muizzu pledged swift implementation of the FTA, underscoring its role in enhancing bilateral trade and investments, particularly in augmenting Maldives' fish exports to China. However, concerns have emerged regarding the potential impact of the Maldives-China FTA on tariff collections for the Maldivian government, raising implications for the country's fiscal policy.

What does the future hold?

To enhance cooperation, India can bolster its development assistance programs in the Maldives, focusing on critical areas the Maldivian government prioritizes, such as infrastructure development, tourism support, and renewable energy projects. It has been seen that, even with the shift in the Maldives' foreign policy favoring China, India has **continued its development cooperation** with the nation. On the contrary, the progress of the projects has accelerated, attributed to India's heightened allocations for the current fiscal year. This underscores India's resolve to persist with its developmental initiatives in the Maldives, irrespective of the political circumstances. Additionally, India should continue to demonstrate unwavering respect for Maldivian sovereignty in all actions, avoiding any perception of interference in internal affairs. Also, cultivating stronger people-to-people ties through cultural exchange initiatives, scholarships, and tourism promotion will foster long-term understanding and goodwill.

On the other hand, collaborating on regional and global issues like climate change and maritime security will underscore India's reliability as a partner while highlighting shared interests. India must maintain an open dialogue with the Maldivian government at all levels, promptly addressing concerns to prevent misunderstandings. Efforts to de-escalate tensions in public disputes and promote positive narratives about the India-Maldives relationship are also essential. Regarding China's growing influence in the Maldives, India should refrain from coercive actions and instead focus on demonstrating its value as a partner compared to other actors. Nevertheless, it is equally imperative for the Maldives to remember that while seeking to appease one power, it should not overlook addressing the significant issues posed by another. In short, they should be aware of the difference between the elephant and the dragon and determine who needs to be addressed in the room first.

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