

NOTES AND REFLEXIONS

ANALYSING THE REPORTING OF THE MALDIVIAN, INDIAN AND CHINESE MEDIA OF THE INDIA OUT CAMPAIGN

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The island nation of Maldives is embroiled into the great powers game in the Indian Ocean Region. Traditionally, it has enjoyed excellent ties with India, but the relations oscillate depending upon who is in power in Maldives. The newly elected President, Mohamed Muizzu has been known to strengthen the “India Out” campaign. The campaign aims to reassert Maldives sovereignty by ensuring there are no Indian troops on the island nation. This campaign is despite the fact that India has gifted several defence equipment, such as boats and helicopters, that are used for humanitarian and medical aid. China is the biggest beneficiary of the India Out campaign. The China-Maldives relations are rising with increasing trade and tourism. The reportage of an issue in a country’s press gives an overall sense of the importance of the issue, as well as the possible policy alignments. In cross border issues, media coverage also plays an influential role in shaping the discourse. Given this background, this review analyses the media coverage of the India Out campaign and its related aspects between 1 December 2023-31 March 2024. This review is from the media lens of three countries: Maldives, India, and China. The authors have analysed several mainstream newspapers and news portals, such as SunOnline, the Edition, the Indian Express, the Hindustan Times, Global Times, China Daily, South China Morning Post, etc.

Muizzu became the President of Maldives in November 2023. Soon after, his office announced the withdrawal of Indian troops from the island nation while expressing hope for continued relations. Immediately following the announcement, an emergency motion was submitted in the Parliament to make public the agreement made with India for the



withdrawal of troops.¹ In December 2023, the Maldivian Government decided against renewing the longstanding hydrography agreement with India. The newly elected administration considered this one of the “secret bilateral agreements” the earlier administration had entered into.² At the same time, the Maldivian press reported that the Government was in talks with India to enhance defence cooperation between the countries.³ Derogatory remarks by some Maldivian Ministers against the Indian Prime Minister and their impact were heavily reported.⁴ This episode was soon followed by coverage of a European Union report which claimed that the political parties PPM-PNC had attempted to spread disinformation about India in the Maldivian Presidential Elections.⁵ However, the Maldives-India Out issue did not stop here, as social media pages and websites of the Maldivian government agencies were hacked.⁶ Since then, multiple rounds of conversations have happened between Maldives and India over the removal of Indian soldiers and the arrival of technical personnel for the maintenance of equipment provided by India.⁷ In March 2024, news emerged that Indian soldiers forcibly boarded Maldivian fishing vessels when they were operating in Maldives SEZ, giving rise to further tensions.⁸ Most recently, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar rejected the remark that India was a bully and highlighted that bullies don’t provide aid of USD 4.5

¹ Naizak Mohamed, ‘Emergency Motion Submitted on Discrepancies in the Number of Indian Soldiers’ (*SunOnline International*, 6 December 2023) <https://en.sun.mv/86330> accessed 22 March 2024.

² SunOnline International, ‘Maldives Drops Hydrography Agreement with India’ (*SunOnline International*, 14 December 2023) <https://en.sun.mv/86488> accessed 22 March 2024.

³ SunOnline International, ‘Discussions Held with India on Enhancing Defense Cooperation’ (*SunOnline International*, 25 December 2023) <https://en.sun.mv/86686> accessed 22 March 2024.

⁴ Aishath Shuba Solih, ‘It Wasn’t “India Out” That India Couldn’t Accept, but the Insults towards Modi: Yameen’ (*The Edition*, 8 February 2024) <https://edition.mv/news/31594> accessed 15 April 2024.

⁵ SunOnline International, ‘EU Report: PPM-PNC Attempted to Spread India-Linked Disinformation’ (*SunOnline International*, 10 January 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/86977> accessed 22 March 2024.

⁶ Naizak Mohamed, ‘Home Ministry’s Website Hacked’ (*SunOnline International*, 23 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87769> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Auditor General’s Office’s Facebook Hacked’ (*SunOnline International*, 13 January 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87021> accessed 22 March 2024.

⁷ Mohamed Rehan, ‘Maldives-India Holds Third Meeting on Deporting Soldiers’ (*SunOnline International*, 17 March 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/88257> accessed 22 March 2024; Naizak Mohamed, ‘Civilian Crew Replacing Indian Soldiers Arrives in Maldives’ (*SunOnline International*, 27 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87828> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Maldives Asks India to Withdraw Troops by March 15’ (*SunOnline International*, 14 January 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87049> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘India: Discussions Also Held on Continued Operation of Indian Aircrafts’ (*SunOnline International*, 15 January 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87056> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘India Agrees to Withdraw Troops before May 10th’ (*SunOnline International*, 2 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87382> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Additional Discussions on Exit of Indian Troops to Take Place in India Today’ (*SunOnline International*, 2 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87380> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘India: Troops in Maldives Will Be Replaced by “Technical Personnel”’ (*SunOnline International*, 4 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87502> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘MNDF Assures Technical Personnel Replacing Indian Soldiers Are Civilians’ (*SunOnline International*, 6 March 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/88036> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Indian Soldiers in Addu City for Helicopter Operations Leave’ (*SunOnline International*, 11 March 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/88150> accessed 22 March 2024.

⁸ Mohamed Rehan, ‘India Soldiers Boarded Local Vessels over “Miscommunication”: Minister’ (*SunOnline International*, 25 March 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/88381> accessed 2 April 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Indian Soldiers Reported to Storm Boat for Second Time’ (*SunOnline International*, 3 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87394> accessed 22 March 2024; SunOnline International, ‘Defense Minister Questioned on Indian Soldiers Storming Local Boats in Closed Door Meeting’ (*SunOnline International*, 21 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87726> accessed 22 March 2024.



million.⁹ This apparently was in response to the Maldivian President's remarks after his state visit to China.¹⁰

The bulk of the focus of the Indian press has been on deciphering the belligerent attitude of the new Maldives government. India has always had strong relations with the Maldives on both diplomatic and military fronts. Indian Navy has been the first responder in the Maldives, whether it is the crisis of the 1988 coup d'état, the 2004 tsunami or training the Maldivian military. Harping on the "India Out" populist campaign that propelled Muizzu to power, the present Maldivian government asked the Indian troops to withdraw by the cut-off date of 10 May 2024. In a demonstration of a firm stance, President Muizzu had said that no Indian military personnel, whether in uniform or civilian clothing, would be allowed to reside in the country.¹¹ The fact that the new Vice President Hussain Mohamed Lateef chose to attend the Indian Ocean Forum organised by China and skipped the Colombo Security Conclave comprising India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Maldives was noted in the Indian press.¹² Professor Uma Puroshothaman, writing for the Deccan Herald, stated that what the Maldivian government is doing now could be interpreted as an assertion of freedom of action by a small State that feels overwhelmed by the power symmetry in economic, political, cultural and military spheres.¹³ Most Indian news portals have criticised Muizzu for not visiting India, which was traditionally the first overseas trip of any Maldivian President.¹⁴ On the contrary, his first state visit was to China amidst the diplomatic turmoil with India.¹⁵ In China, Muizzu firmly committed to enhancing bilateral ties by implementing a free trade agreement with China and called it Maldives's 'closest development partner'.¹⁶ Almost simultaneous to Muizzu's diplomatic trip to China, the derogatory remarks made by his deputy ministers on Indian Prime Minister Modi marked a new low in India-Maldives relations.¹⁷ A section of the Indian press attributed Chinese interference as the prime reason for this diplomatic turmoil between the two historically cordial neighbouring countries. According to the former Indian diplomat Shyam Saran, the Chinese government's call for support for Maldives' territorial integrity and

⁹ SunOnline International, 'India Increases Aid for Maldives to USD 93.8m' (*SunOnline International*, 8 February 2024) <https://en.sun.mv/87503> accessed 22 March 2024.

¹⁰ Mizna Mohamed, 'Muizzu's to India: We Maybe Small, but You Cannot Bully Us' (*thePress.mv*, 13 January 2024) <https://en.thepress.mv/16405> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹¹ Shubhajit Roy, 'Maldives President Muizzu: No Indian Troops, in Uniform or Civilian Clothes, after May 10' (*The Indian Express*, 5 March 2024) <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/maldives-president-muizzu-indian-troops-civilian-clothing-9196570/> accessed 22 March 2024.

¹² Monica Verma, 'Social Media Turmoil Underscores India's Importance for Maldives; Muizzu's "India Out" Campaign Must Take a Backseat' (*Firstpost*, 9 January 2024) <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/social-media-turmoil-underscores-indias-importance-for-maldives-muizzus-india-out-campaign-must-take-a-backseat-13591982.html> accessed 14 April 2024.

¹³ Uma Purushothaman, 'The Tragedy of Being a Great Power' (*Deccan Herald*, 17 January 2024) <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/india-maldives-china-neighbours-mohamed-muizzu-male-2852332> accessed 22 March 2024.

¹⁴ PTI, 'Stop Being Stubborn and Mend Fences with Neighbours: Maldives Prez Told' (*Deccan Chronicle*, 25 March 2024) <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/neighbours/stop-being-stubborn-and-mend-fences-with-neighbours-maldives-prez-told-886406> accessed 25 March 2024.

¹⁵ Saurav Mukherjee, 'Maldives President Muizzu Signs 20 Agreements with China, Including Tourism' (*Livemint*, 10 January 2024) <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/indiamaldives-row-president-mohamed-muizzu-meets-chinese-counterpart-xi-jinping-in-beijing-hold-talks-11704889754963.html> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹⁶ Pia Krishnakutty, "'No Doubt China Will Be Our Closest Partner': Maldives President Muizzu Praises BRI amid Row with India' (*The Print*, 9 January 2024) <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/no-doubt-china-will-be-our-closest-partner-maldives-president-muizzu-praises-bri-amid-row-with-india/1916847/> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹⁷ Geeta Mohan, 'India-Maldives Row: Explaining the Story so Far' (*India Today*, 16 January 2024) <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/explained-india-maldives-row-story-so-far-mohamed-muizzu-pm-narendra-modi-2489463-2024-01-16> accessed 13 April 2024.



sovereignty and its opposition to any external interference in its domestic affairs is a subtle targeted attack on India.¹⁸

The rising tensions between India and Maldives over the latter's deepening ties with China has been a subject of extensive commentary in the Chinese media. From accusing India of having a 'colonialist mentality'¹⁹ to criticising its 'domineering mindset'²⁰, the Chinese press has portrayed India as an overbearing hegemon trying to stifle Maldives' sovereignty. Chinese outlets have provided historical context to the 'India Out' campaign, depicting India's military intervention in the Maldives in 1988 and the previous government's 'India First' policy, while highlighting that India continued to pursue a 'condescending and unilaterally egoistic' position in the Indian Ocean region, causing resentment among the Maldivian people. Drawing attention to a similar 'India Out' campaign in Bangladesh with a boycott of Indian goods²¹, the Chinese press reports that India's neighbours express 'strong apathy' towards New Delhi's perceived regional dominance.²² Chinese analysts portrayed the Maldivian President's visit to China as prioritising its interests over India's, not as a pro-China tilt.²³ They defended China's cooperation with the Maldives, citing infrastructure projects, tourism, and climate change mitigation as areas of mutual benefit based on 'mutual respect' and 'non-interference'.²⁴ The Chinese media portrayed Muizzu's aim to reduce Indian influence and exercise greater autonomy for the Maldives as a natural step by leveraging ties with China.²⁵ Claiming China as wanting to coexist, the Chinese press has claimed that it is India's foreign policy that is accused of being highly competitive and confrontational, unnecessarily instigating a 'dragon-elephant dispute'.²⁶ The Chinese press has called India a "Big Bully" for using coercive tactics like boycotts, sanctions, and building a military base near Maldives.²⁷ Rather than seeing Maldives' ties with China as a 'betrayal', the Chinese press has impressed upon India to have an open mindset about regional countries' cooperation with China for their development interests.²⁸ Despite the 'pro-China' stand of the Maldivian President, the Chinese media itself acknowledges that the

¹⁸ Shyam Saran, 'Doing Diplomacy with Patience in Maldives' (*Hindustan Times*, 15 January 2024) <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/doing-diplomacy-with-patience-in-maldives-101705325841591.html> accessed 22 March 2024.

¹⁹ China Daily, 'Maldives Knows Too Well What Being India's Neighbor Is Like' (*China Daily*, 7 March 2024) <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202403/07/WS65e905e6a31082fc043bb146.html> accessed 22 March 2024.

²⁰ GT Reporter, 'China's Scientific Research Activities in Relevant Waters for Peaceful Purposes, Says FM on Xiang Yang Hong 03 Upcoming Port Call' (6 February 2024) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1306803.shtml> accessed 22 March 2024.

²¹ Shaikh Azizur Rahman, 'Bangladeshis Launch "India Out" Campaign over Alleged Meddling Linked to Hasina' (*South China Morning Post*, 23 February 2024) <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3253018/bangladeshis-launch-india-out-campaign-over-new-delhis-alleged-meddling-keep-hasina-power> accessed 22 March 2024.

²² Lin Minwang, 'Why Neighbors Are Resentful of India's Interfering' (*Global Times*, 1 February 2024) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1306532.shtml> accessed 22 March 2024.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Victor Gao, 'Why India Misreads Maldivian Leader's China Visit' (*Global Times*, 9 January 2024) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305069.shtml> accessed 22 March 2024.

²⁵ China Daily, 'India's Attitude to Blame for Maldives' Demand: China Daily Editorial' (*China Daily*, 16 January 2024) <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/16/WS65a68175a3105f21a507c9a1.html> accessed 22 March 2024.

²⁶ Global Times, 'Is India "scared of" China? Here Is Our Perspective: Global Times Editorial' (*Global Times*, 4 February 2024) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1306686.shtml> accessed 22 March 2024.

²⁷ China Daily (n 19).

²⁸ Global Times, 'GT Voice: China-Maldives Ties Benefit Region, No Impact on India' (*Global Times*, 10 January 2024) <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305141.shtml> accessed 22 March 2024.



Maldives still needs India's partnership.²⁹ Therefore, the Chinese media suggests that India participate in regional economic cooperation rather than opposing China's influence out of insecurity.³⁰

Overall, the reporting in the three countries varies. The Maldivian media, which is the smallest amongst the three, has been very factual and has mostly covered different events that have taken place. The Indian media has been packed with many analyses and opinions which have tried to discern the real reasons behind the shift in Maldives stand towards India. The Chinese media called out India but has exercised restraint in the process. Overall, it appears as if the Chinese press neither wants to portray India as an enemy, nor wants to allow India to exercise its dominant status in the Indian Ocean Region, which has prevailed over the years.

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²⁹ Maria Siow, 'Changing Delhi-Malé "Dynamics", Troop Withdrawal Unlikely to Affect Partnership' (*South China Morning Post*, 7 February 2024) <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3251274/maldives-still-needs-indias-partnership-despite-shifting-dynamics-delhi-male-ties-troop-withdrawal> accessed 22 March 2024.

³⁰ Global Times (n 28).