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*Sri Lanka*

*Bhutan*

*Maldives*

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**CS**

**3 CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC  
STUDIES AND SIMULATION**





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## The Cricket Conundrum: Champions Trophy 2025

By Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM



The cricketing world eagerly anticipated the return of top-tier international cricket to Pakistan with the staging of the Champions Trophy. However, recent developments have thrown a potential spanner in the works, with speculation arising that India might follow the precedent set by the Asia Cup and decline to send its team to Pakistan, citing security concerns. This potential turn of events raises significant questions about the delicate balance between sports diplomacy, security considerations, and the future venue for the prestigious tournament.



Cricket has long been a vehicle for fostering diplomatic ties and promoting goodwill among nations. The return of international cricket was seen as a positive step in this direction. The International Cricket Council's (ICC) decision to host the Champions Trophy in Pakistan was an indication of the improving security situation in Pakistan. However, Pakistan's media is rife with speculations and the possibility of India opting out introduces a diplomatic challenge that the cricketing world will need to navigate carefully. India had similar concerns about safety during the Asia Cup, which was scheduled in Pakistan. But eventually, India decided against sending its team to Pakistan, and the tournament was then held in a hybrid manner in both Pakistan and Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> This decision, though opposed by Pakistan but was ultimately accepted, allowing the tournament to proceed without major disruptions. The possibility of the Champions Trophy being relocated to the UAE or another neutral venue is now being considered as a viable solution to prevent a repeat of the Asia Cup scenario.



Apprehensions on the part of India about touring Pakistan are the result of deeper historical and geopolitical tension between the two countries. Though security concerns are a valid consideration for any international team, the situation in Pakistan isn't that bad and the Pak establishment is pretty sensitive on account of its handling of international events which enhances its credibility in the comity of nations. Also, the sheer amount of popularity that cricket enjoys in that country, any security threat developing towards cricket would be a surprise. But then security institutions do get surprised and the public support for the event makes it an ideal target too. The

proposed relocation of the Champions Trophy has obvious implications beyond the diplomatic and security realms. Cricket fans in Pakistan are eagerly anticipating the tournament as a momentous occasion, marking the return of top-tier cricket to their home soil. A venue change would undoubtedly disappoint the passionate cricketing community in Pakistan. Though hosting the tournament in a neutral venue could still provide an opportunity for fans from various countries to witness high-quality cricket but it would be an embarrassment for Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has urged the ICC to sign the Champions Trophy 2025 hosting rights agreements with it, stressing that the PCB should be compensated if the Indian team refuses to travel to the country, citing political and security reasons, reports said on November 26.<sup>2</sup> It was also said that PCB Chairman Zaka Ashraf and COO Salman Naseer had met the ICC executive board in Ahmedabad to discuss the hosting of the Champions Trophy in Pakistan in February-March, 2025.<sup>3</sup> The probability of the Board of Control of Cricket for India again refusing to send its team to Pakistan was also discussed. PCB officials had told the ICC that if India refuses to play in Pakistan on security grounds, the ICC should appoint an independent security agency.<sup>4</sup>

The Champions Trophy conundrum underscores the complicated interplay between sports, politics and diplomacy. Striking a fine balance is crucial to maintaining the spirit of sports and international cricket and fostering harmonious relations among cricketing nations. Though the feasibility of shifting the championship to a neutral and safe venue seems pragmatic, the cricketing community and governments should work collectively to address any security concerns and ensure the smooth conduct of the Champions Trophy, wherever it may take place.



# Closure of Afghan Embassy: A Reflection of Diplomatic Complexities

By Col Maneesh Parthsarthy, VSM



The Afghanistan Embassy announced its permanent closure in New Delhi on 23 Nov 23. The embassy stated a considerable reduction in Afghani citizens in India, wherein almost 50 percent of the Afghan traders, students and refugees have left India over the past two years.<sup>5</sup> The fact that very few countries in the world recognise the Taliban regime complicated diplomatic relations for the Afghan Embassy in India. Diplomatic recognition is a fundamental aspect of international relations and without it, the embassy struggled to conduct its affairs effectively.



The embassy represented the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which was deposed through a military campaign by the Taliban on August 15, 2021.<sup>6</sup> Though the embassy's persistence in operating for 27 months without the support of the Taliban regime suggests a commitment to maintaining a diplomatic presence in India. However, working in another country without the mandate and recognition of the parent country is a challenging task especially when the home country is yet to be recognised by the majority of the international community. The Embassy could not have functioned for long in the absence of support from the Taliban regime back home. India which has an impeccable record as far as democratic governance goes, will find it difficult to recognise the Taliban regime given its poor human rights and gender discrimination record. India presently could have only informally supported the embassy but this arrangement could not have been a permanent one. The fact that the majority of the countries don't recognise the Taliban regime indicates a broader international sentiment against the group. This lack of recognition can impact Afghanistan's ability to engage in formal diplomatic relations, international trade, and access to aid. The situation reflects the complexities and difficulties faced by diplomatic missions when operating in an environment where the legitimacy of the government is in question. The non-recognition of the Taliban regime by the international community, including India, has significant implications for Afghanistan's diplomatic relations and its ability to engage with the rest of the world.

The closure of the embassy will surely adversely affect the large pool of Afghan students who are either studying or plan to study in India. The embassy not only processes visas but also remains a single window of redressal of issues faced by the student community in routine matters. Due to the sudden closure the means of communication and assistance to students have been severely limited. This closure equally affects an already scaled down business transactions between both countries,



due to disruptions in trade-related certifications, documentation and clarifications. Embassies sometimes play a crucial role in negotiations and troubleshooting bilateral business deals and shaping the overall investment climate. Diplomatic missions also facilitate cultural exchanges and interactions between the people of two countries. The closure may hinder such exchanges,

impacting the cultural people to people ties between India and Afghanistan. The embassy also serves as a focal point for community events and support for expatriates. Closure will surely lead to a lack of organised community activities and reduced assistance for Afghan nationals living in India. Closure will also affect consular services such as passport renewal and other legal services for the Afghan people. The embassy was also involved in coordinating humanitarian assistance and support. Its closure will impact its ability to address the needs of Afghan citizens in India during emergencies or crises. Afghanistan had been maintaining an embassy in Delhi and two consulates in Hyderabad and Mumbai. The consulates in Hyderabad and Mumbai continue to work hitherto fore.<sup>7</sup> The closure of the embassy has definitely strained diplomatic relations between India and Afghanistan and restoring diplomatic ties and reopening the embassy in the future would be more challenging.

Serious diplomacy would be needed to find alternative mechanisms to facilitate future interactions as individuals and businesses may face increased challenges in navigating the diplomatic landscape. Despite the closure of the embassy in Delhi, India and Afghanistan are still maintaining relations albeit at a very functional level. India has a 'technical team' in Kabul for processing visas for Afghan traders and travellers to India. There are two weekly flights to India. The same flights carry humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>. This development underscores the broader implications that geopolitical actions can have on the daily lives and activities of people in both countries. The success of any strategy would depend on the evolving political dynamics, the willingness of key stakeholders to engage and the atmosphere promoted by the Taliban regime. Additionally, the success of diplomatic efforts often requires a balanced mix of patience, strategic vision and flexibility with respect to changing political circumstances.



## 17<sup>th</sup> Edition of Surya Kiran: India-Nepal Joint Military Exercise



By Tavishi Sharma, Research Intern

The 17<sup>th</sup> Edition of the India-Nepal Joint Military Exercise commenced on 24 November, and will continue till 07 December 2023.<sup>9</sup> The annual collaborative exercise is hosted alternatively between the two nations and took place in Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand this year.<sup>10</sup> The exercise aims to collectively pursue mutual security goals and foster bilateral relations between two friendly neighbours.<sup>11</sup> The Nepalese Army and Indian Army sent in contingents comprising of 334 and 354 personnel, respectively.<sup>12</sup> The Indian Army was represented by the Kumaon Battalion of the Panschul Brigade and the Nepal Army was represented by the Shri Tara Dal Battalion.<sup>13</sup>



The two nations share a robust history of military cooperation and strong diplomatic ties, which date back to 1965 when they commenced the practice of conferring the title of 'Honorary General' to each other's army chiefs.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, the then Nepal Army Chief, General Rajendra Chettri, visited India and was conferred this rank in the Indian Army.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, his Indian counterpart, General Bipin Rawat, was conferred the rank of 'Honorary General' in 2017.<sup>16</sup> Further, 2011 onwards the two nations commenced joint training at the platoon level with 30 men, as per the seventh Nepal-India Bilateral Consultative Group on Security. This exercise focused on jungle warfare and counter-insurgency operations at Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School, Vairangate in Mizoram, and a similar school at Amlekhganj in Nepal. Subsequently, in a landmark achievement, battalions from the Indian and Nepali armies participated in a combined training programme to ensure interoperability in the disaster-prone region of Uttarakhand. Furthermore, the two neighbours have been hosting the Indo-Nepali Joint Military Exercise Surya Kiran since its inauguration in 2010.<sup>17</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> Edition of Surya Kiran was held in Nepal, at a Nepal Army Battle School based in Rupandehi, in December 2022.



The two nations will train their armies collaboratively through the Surya Kiran exercise with the aim of enhancing interoperability in jungle warfare, counter terrorism operations in mountainous terrains and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief under the United Nations (UN) charter on peace keeping operations.<sup>18</sup> This edition of the exercise, as per India's Ministry of Defence, emphasised the employment of drones and measures for counter-drone offensives, medical training, environmental conservation and aviation capacity building.<sup>19</sup>

The MoD notes that the exercise would also include 'use of new generation equipment, latest state-of-the-art technological simulations and the employment of drones'.<sup>20</sup> Beyond its tactical aspects, exercise SURYA KIRAN embodies a strong

bond of camaraderie, trust and shared values between India and Nepal, signifying a resolute dedication to advancing broader defence cooperation. It serves as a platform for mutual learning and knowledge exchange among soldiers from India and Nepal, facilitating the practice of communicating best practices to foster a deeper understanding of each other's operability. Moreover, this is an excellent opportunity for troops to refine their operational capabilities, enhance combat skills and fortify coordination in demanding scenarios.

According to the MoD's Annual Report 2018 to 2019, India has been actively engaged in defence cooperation activities with 40 nations.<sup>21</sup> However, Nepal is one of the nation's Indian military diplomacies have paid significant attention to. In recent years, Nepal has seen the largest number of visits by the Indian Army Chiefs.<sup>22</sup> This is testimony to the Indian Armed Forces' dedication to the 'Neighbourhood First' policy emphasising Nepal's significant strategic importance. The strong commitment and military cooperation extended to Nepal align with India's strategic goal of becoming a regional power. However, Nepal's efforts to look for an alternative beyond India have raised considerable security concerns for India. China has been increasing its military cooperation with Nepal, but there are also serious allegations that Chinese forces are encroaching in Nepalese territories including Gorkha, Dolakha, Darchua, Sindhupalchowk and Humla.<sup>23</sup> This is a serious concern for both Nepal and India. India needs to take swift action, leveraging its military prowess to safeguard its national interests. Thus, it becomes important to emphasise the role of the Indian military as an effective tool, to foster a purposeful partnership with Nepal through exercises such as Surya Kiran, providing humanitarian aid in times of need, extending medical assistance and forging bilateral defence agreements.





## A Global Playground in India's Backyard: Bangladesh Gripped by Anti-Hasina Violence

By Tavishi Sharma



General elections in Bangladesh are scheduled for 07 Jan 2024. The current Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina will serve as the candidate from the current majority party, the Awami League (AL). However, the opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have withdrawn from the election in light of violent government pushback against their peaceful protests. The United States (US), among other international voices, are calling for a "free and peaceful election", an assertion that has been perceived as an interference in the nation's internal matters by the AL.<sup>24</sup> United Nations experts have expressed their concern over this



escalating violence, stating they are "deeply disturbed by the sharp rise in political violence, arrests of senior opposition leaders, mass arbitrary detention of thousands of political activists, use of excessive force by the authorities and internet shutdowns to disrupt protests".<sup>25</sup>

The BNP and its allies seek a neutral interim government ahead of the general elections, arguing that free and fair polls are impossible under PM Hasina's leadership, a demand rejected by the Awami League government.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, violence and unrest have gripped the nation ahead of its polls. Human Rights Watch has reported that Bangladesh authorities are targeting opposition leaders and supporters ahead of the general elections.<sup>27</sup> Nearly 10,000 opposition activists have been arrested since a planned rally by the BNP on October 28 2023. The ongoing violence has resulted in 16 casualties, including 2 police officers, and over 5,500 people have been injured.<sup>28</sup> Following the 28 October violence, the BNP called for a general strike from 31 October to 02 November, during which violent confrontations broke out between the police, opposition members, and ruling party supporters that continue. There have been reports of the use of excessive force by the police in responding to protests.<sup>29</sup> The opposition's scepticism of the electoral process in Bangladesh has been rising since the provision of a caretaker government was done away with, serving as the primary reason for the BNP rejection of the upcoming election and refusal to register until PM Hasina steps down.<sup>30</sup>

Several foreign governments have emphasised the need to end violence and focus on establishing a free and fair election in Bangladesh. The US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Peter Haas, highlighted, "Any action that undermines the democratic election process – including violence, preventing people from exercising their right to peaceful assembly, and internet access – calls into question the ability to conduct free and fair elections."<sup>31</sup> American officials have expressed their commitment to urge all stakeholders in Bangladesh to collaborate for the benefit of the Bangladeshi populace.<sup>32</sup> Many in Bangladesh, especially the ruling party, are concerned about alleged interference from the US. The Chief Election Commissioner expressed worry about American interference, referencing US visa restrictions imposed in September on individuals deemed to undermine Bangladesh's elections.<sup>33</sup> In response to American opinions, Russia claims that the US Ambassador pledged to provide "informational support" against authorities that used force against participants in peaceful demonstrations.<sup>34</sup> Condemning the actions of the US

Ambassador, the Russian spokesperson called their involvement undue interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.<sup>35</sup> Moscow asserts that elections should be conducted independently, in full compliance with national legislation and without the assistance of overseas well-wishers. Recent developments in the deepening Russia-Bangladesh relationship, including the Russian presence in the Bangladeshi Chattogram port and talks of a nuclear power plant in Bangladesh, underscore Dhaka's precarious position between two rivals vying for influence in South Asia. While the US remains a crucial trade ally for Bangladesh that strongly emphasises human rights standards, Russia is an emerging significant player willing to acknowledge the robustness of Bangladesh's democracy. Amid foreign concerns about the nature of their elections, Bangladesh has extended an open invitation to foreign envoys to be part of the international team of observers for its general election in January 2024.<sup>36</sup>



India and Bangladesh share deep and inextricably links in their ancient civilisational connect and shared struggle for Indian independence. PM Indira Gandhi played a pivotal role in 1971, in aiding Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in achieving independence for Bangladesh. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, has been the PM of Bangladesh for four terms now and shares her father's pro-India sentiments.<sup>37</sup> Sheikh Hasina was elected as PM in 1996, 2008, 2013 and 2018 with four successful terms of power and an expanding relationship with India.<sup>38</sup> Her stance against terrorism and fundamentalist factions operating on the India-Bangladesh border has specifically bolstered her relationship with PM Modi. She has been vocal about her support for Hindu minorities in Bangladesh and has actively condemned the persecution they face.<sup>39</sup> Recently, the two nations commenced bilateral trade in rupees and inaugurated the Agarthala-Akhauail rail link to connect India's northeast with Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> Bangladesh's economic bounce-back with the support of India's USD 800 mn credit line is further testament to their significant relationship.<sup>41</sup> The two nations' complex and interdependent relation suggests that India's stability is closely tied to Bangladesh's. If Sheikh Hasina is removed from power and a care taker government is put in place, presumably by a member of the anti-Indian opposition parties, India's carefully curated geopolitical landscape may crumble. Bangladesh will then look beyond India to China, for robust financial and economic support, bringing India's most significant adversary in the region closer to its border. Moreover, violence against Hindus in the region is also likely to surge. It is in India's best interest that a candidate with leanings similar to Sheikh Hasina remains in power in Bangladesh. Moreover, as a vibrant and diverse democracy, India also has a pivotal responsibility to uphold the sanctity of democratic institutions including free and fair elections in its region of influence.

Moreover, India is navigating challenges with other global powers in the region. The US has emerged as an invaluable ally to India in the past few years. The two nations are working closely on issues related to the Indo-Pacific, building economic resilience and strengthening their presence in South Asia. A clash with the US, regarding Bangladesh, may impact these relations in the long term, especially as fissures in the relationship were observed when India diverged from the US's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia, then, is the other global player in India's backyard, one with great strategic importance and a long-standing relationship with India. By supporting or displaying inactivity to American advances in the region, India faces the possibility of disturbing the Russians, who are crucial trade partners for India and help maintain its energy security. Balancing these relations poses complexities for India, necessitating careful diplomacy to maintain violence, while addressing regional concerns.

As signs of unrest escalate in Bangladesh, potentially leading to internal conflict, it is imperative for PM Modi to intervene as a mediator to prevent further escalation. While emphasising that elections are an internal issue for Bangladesh, India may still mediate and help quell tensions between Bangladesh and the US. As all channels of communication between the government and the opposition have broken down, India's role as a neutral third party can facilitate dialogue between the AL and BNP and end this spiral of violence to usher in peace. Bangladesh's significance in India's regional security dynamics cannot be overemphasised, precluding a 'hands off' approach towards the political situation in Bangladesh. Unless India intervenes, there is a real threat of wide spread radicalisation in Bangladesh as a result of the repressive and oppressive measures unleashed by PM Hasina against opposition parties. Moreover, the rise of opposition sponsored anti-India sentiments, coupled with the possible rise of fundamentalist factions, will pose a significant threat to India's national security and sovereignty. India must delicately balance the global powers and non-state factions in Bangladesh to ensure peace is restored to the region and there are no major spillovers into Indian territory.



## Strategic Significance of Adani's Port Investments In Sri Lanka Amid Rising Chinese Supervision

By Vidya Gonuguntla



The Indian conglomerate Adani Group has been a key player in challenging China's sphere of influence through their large-scale infrastructural investments across various regions of the world. The United States (US) backed, Adani developmental project deal of the Colombo West International Container Terminal (CWICT), at the Colombo Port that is underway, underscores "the huge strategic significance of Adani's global business", enabling the backing of Indian interests in the South Asian region, and Sri Lanka.<sup>42</sup>



Exemplified through the acquisition of the

Haifa Port in Northern Israel for USD 1.15 bn, which was purchased by the group in January this year, moves to truncate China's influence are seen.<sup>43</sup> This acquisition also has great importance for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor that has been proposed by the Indian Government, acting as the gateway needed in the Middle East to connect the Arabian Gulf to Europe.<sup>44</sup>

China's rising global ambition and ever-increasing strategic foothold intensified by their various infrastructural and financial initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative have since decades, been met with concerns, and attempts to balance, counter, and tilt this strategic dominion. Gautam Adani, the Chairman of Adani Group, has been eyeing Sri Lanka long before their recent economic and political collapse, as an investment opportunity that could possibly play on China's scuppering initiatives, which owns 52 per cent of Sri Lanka's bilateral debt, holds it in a stranglehold.<sup>45</sup> Often referred to as a nominee of the Indian Government, the Adani group has been a monumental figure in facilitating investments in port building and transshipment initiatives, having signed a Build Operate Transfer (BOT) Agreement in September 2021 with Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) and one of the nation's largest listed companies, John Keells Holdings to develop the CWICT, while holding majority stakes (51 per cent) at the Colombo Port, one of the busiest shipping routes in the world.<sup>46</sup> In collaboration, and seising the opportunity to fund efforts to counter China's expansion in West Asia, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), announced a funding of USD 553 mn for the estimated USD 1 bn project, making it the largest foreign direct investment that has ever been made in Sri Lanka.<sup>47</sup>





The location of the Colombo port, has immense strategic and economic value, located in the Indian Ocean amidst epicentres of trade, Dubai and Singapore, making its influence well-sought after, and international ports positioned at pivotal junctions connecting the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal, where a minimum of half the world's commercial vessels pass by, is an opportunity to build ties around Asia while curbing Chinese influence.<sup>48</sup> The Hambantota port, build by the Chinese , is characteristic of 'Chinese Debt Diplomacy', where Sri Lanka's inability to pay resulted in its forfeit to China, causing greater security and geopolitical concerns in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>49</sup> Fearing China's usage of the

Hambantota Port as a military base, as the Yuan Wang 5, a Chinese 'research and survey' vessel, with the potential for dual use as a spy ships,<sup>50</sup> the urgency of US investment in the building of another strategic port seems evident if one had to question their partnership with the Adani group, whose share price and investor confidence had been shattered following the release of the American Hindenburg Report alleging severe overvaluation, concerns of debt levels, and improper use of tax havens, and showcases a reaffirmation of their willingness to advance their ambitions in the region.<sup>51</sup> However, this also casts a shadow over Adani's credibility as a reliable partner in shaping the region's economic landscape. Recently, the increasing frequency of China using the Hambantota Port to refuel military warships and research ships such as the Shi Yan 6, has raised severe concerns regarding the suspicious Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. Strategic patterns of China can be used to infer, that these ships could be positioned to collect information not only about India's role in the region, but to map natural ecological treasures in the rich and unique wealth of ecosystems present in the Gulf of Mannar.<sup>52</sup>

The global economic chessboard, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, is witnessing a strategic interplay between key players aiming to assert dominance, expand influence, and counterbalance adversaries. Adani Group's investments backed by the US, while resonating with India's broader geostrategic interests, in Sri Lanka's Colombo Port, reflect a broader concern to counter China's growing sway. However, controversies, like Adani's alleged ties to the Indian government and financial issues, cloud perceptions. The heightened tensions surrounding Chinese initiatives, especially exemplified by the Hambantota Port, illustrate the pitfalls of debt diplomacy, as we see escalated security and geopolitical anxieties, particularly regarding the potential transformation of such infrastructures into military assets, as evidenced by Chinese vessels utilising these ports for potentially dual-purpose activities. Thus, the region's complex interests demand a cautious approach.



## India-China-Bhutan: Trade Diplomacy and Aid for Bhutan

By Tavishi Sharma



India has announced that it will allow 103,600 tonnes of food items to be exported to Bhutan as part of a humanitarian operation.<sup>53</sup> This action represents India's willingness to make concession for its strategic partners, in the midst of broad export restrictions. The ban imposed in July 2023 prohibited the overseas shipment of non-basmati varieties of rice to nations like Bhutan, Singapore and Mauritius.<sup>54</sup> The ban was imposed as a result of growing concerns over El Nino, a weather pattern that has great impact on monsoons, its



impact on India's rice output and Russia's blockade of Ukraine's grain shipments. India's export ban sent global rice prices soaring. It's share in global rice exports is nearly 40 per cent and the export ban implied that several net rice importers were left with a constrained domestic supply and acute food shortage. Global prices hit a 12-year high following India's ban.<sup>55</sup> The FAO's All-Rice Price Index leapt 129.7 points in July 2023, up 19.6 per cent from a year ago.<sup>56</sup> At present, India will supply 14,184 tonnes of wheat grain, 5,326 tonnes of wheat flour, nearly 15,300 tonnes of *maida*, *suji* (semolina) and 48,804 tonnes of broken rice to Bhutan under humanitarian operations.<sup>57</sup> The exports to Bhutan will be handled by the National Cooperative Exports Ltd, a government export body set up under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act 2002 to export agricultural produce and allied items.



India's strong inclination to support Bhutan in a moment of short food supply stems from two reasons. First, Bhutan and China are finalising their long-standing boundary talks, which are of great strategic interest to India. Second, the export ban exemption serves as an opportunity for India to strengthen diplomatic ties with Bhutan and extend humanitarian assistance in a time of need, further positioning itself as a leader in South Asia. In October 2023, Bhutan and China held their 25<sup>th</sup> round of border talks in Beijing, following several Expert Group Meetings between the two nations since the beginning of 2023, to discuss the "3-Step Roadmap" towards settling their border issues.<sup>58</sup> During the 25<sup>th</sup> round of talks, the two sides signed a Cooperation Agreement detailing the functioning of a Joint Technical Team on the delimitation and demarcation of the Bhutan-China boundary that had been agreed to during the 13<sup>th</sup> Expert Group Meeting in August 2023.<sup>59</sup> The Prime Minister (PM) of Bhutan, Lotay Tshering, noted that China and Bhutan were 'inching' towards completing their 3-Step Roadmap and that the talks also included a possible trade-off between Chinese claims in Doklam and the ones in northern Bhutan.<sup>60</sup> Bhutan's increasing negotiation with China and talks about border dispute settlements are greatly troubling to India. The contested region is where the India-China-Bhutan borders meet and includes a site of great importance to India, Doklam, which India considers to be Bhutanese territory. India is concerned that in case the region is ceded to China in a border settlement, it would impact the security of sensitive Siliguri Corridor that links mainland India to the Northeastern region.<sup>61</sup> In response to rising Indian concerns about these boundary talks, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk of Bhutan paid an 8-day visit to

India from 03 to 10 November 2023, possibly to quell any concerns regarding the talks with China and reaffirm Bhutan's commitment to India. This visit marks the second high level engagement between Bhutan and India this year.

India is actively fostering deeper relations with Bhutan through its export ban exemption, aimed at ensuring strategic ties with nations like Nepal and Bhutan that are increasingly dependent on imports to meet their domestic demand. Bhutan's reliance on imports to meet its food, oil, base metal, machinery and electrical appliances demand, makes it crucial for India to protect this strategic relationship by offering aid in times of need. India contributes up to 80 per cent of Bhutan's total imports and the two nations share a burgeoning trade relationship.<sup>62</sup> In FY23, India's exports to Bhutan of goods in agricultural commodities, including cereals, spices, meat, dairy and poultry products were USD 148.31 mn of total USD 1.07 bn against USD 135.94 million out of a total USD 874.53 mn in FY22, according to the ministry of commerce and industry.<sup>63</sup> However, Chinese exports to Bhutan have also been increasing over the past few years, by approximately USD 130 mn since 2018, highlighting the hostile neighbour's interest in Bhutan.<sup>64</sup> The decision to provide food security to Bhutan is an excellent step to show support to a fellow South Asian nation and reaffirm India's strategic importance and leadership capabilities in the region.

While the China-Bhutan boundary talks are yet to reach a conclusion, the border settlement, if and when established, will mark a major change in Bhutan's geopolitical standing. Subsequently, it will gravely harm India's strategic interests in the region. The, as the reality of a China-Bhutan settlement becomes increasingly apparent, India must leverage its power and influence, through trade and diplomacy, to find a seat at this table and assert its own interests in the region through allies like Bhutan. The strategic move to support Bhutan through a food security crisis is a commendable step in emphasising India's effective diplomatic leverage and strength in the region.



## Turbulence in India-Maldives Relations: 'India First' to 'India Out' By Vidya Gonuguntla



The election of Dr Mohamed Muizzu as the President of Maldives, who assumed office on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023 has brought with it raising fears and problems, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that India wished would not come to fruition.<sup>65</sup> Unapologetically driven by and gaining popularity through an 'India Out' foreign policy stance that has become synonymous with his political ideology, this ensuing realignment of geo-political dynamics was evident minutes into his swear-in ceremony, in which he mentioned, and later formally requested India's Minister of Earth Sciences Kiren Rijju who was present on behalf of the Indian Government at the ceremony, to "withdraw its military troops" from the archipelago.<sup>66</sup> Often described as a pro-China coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives to which Muizzu belongs, and the People's National Congress was built on the momentum of former President Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018) who spearheaded that 'India Out' campaign as the opposition leg of the previous incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party who in contrast, maintained an 'India First' approach.<sup>67</sup>



Alleging weakening national sovereignty, and ulterior motives operations in relation to the presence of 77 Indian security personnel stationed at Maldives to maintain and operate a Dornier aircraft, and helicopters provided by the Indian Government, the calls for India to withdraw all personnel from the Maldives, uses an oversimplification of the agenda – that the Maldives wanted no foreign military on its soil, as it was the promise of Muizzu's campaign, from day one.<sup>68</sup> However, it is hard to ignore that this excuse is a sugar-coating for a discreetly India-specific intent. The favour of a closer tie with China under Muizzu's administration as was the dynamic between India and the Maldives under Mr Solih's administration, is a blow for Delhi – with China's recent interests in gaining control over South Asia and Indian Ocean region bidding it to inject hundreds of millions of dollars into the Maldives through loans, grants, and partnerships to build infrastructure and developmental projects.<sup>69</sup> The eagerness to come under the ambit of China, especially a country as small as the Maldives which is barely 1/4<sup>th</sup> of Delhi in land area with a population of about merely 5,00,000, is obvious if we view the infrastructural policies adopted by its former presidents.<sup>70</sup> The cancellation of Indian firm GMR's contract to construct the Malé airports and courting for a Chinese contract under Mohamed Waheed's presidency (2008-12) and, further increasing Chinese presence by joining the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of President Xi Jinping and other free trade agreements during Abdulla Yameen's presidency (2013-2018).<sup>71</sup> However, with Chinese debt of such a small nation standing at about USD 3.1 bn and USD 1.4 bn, will drive it to become another case like that of Sri Lanka, falling into severe debt traps, and subsequently more dominant and controlling in the Chinese presence.<sup>72</sup>





The work done by former president Solih's continuous efforts to maintain and reassert an 'India First' policy in line with PM Narendra Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, during his tenure, shows extreme highs and lows in the internal politics as well as the entrenched geopolitics of India and China, causing major swings in foreign policy with each change of government.<sup>73</sup> Violent swings within the foreign policies of any country can only be detrimental, causing incidences of high internal power struggles, leaving national interests and foreign policy on the

backburner.<sup>74</sup> A running Anti-India rhetoric has been gaining momentum for some time in Maldives, placing a hold on various policies that the Indian Government wishes to carry out to build bilateral support, such as building a consulate at Addu atoll, the southernmost point on the Maldives archipelago, proposed when External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited last year.<sup>75</sup> This Anti-India movement, has also gained momentum among the youth, and attracted many— a reason being the radicalisation of a certain few, who have jihadi connections, where a considerable section of the population would prefer fighting for the Islamic State in Syria or Iraq than other foreign nations, causing anxiety regarding the effects on social, economic, military, and security stability of a country in such close proximity of India.<sup>76</sup> These growing apprehensions embodied in the new government, have also been perceived by the Indian government in a sour light, with the perceived downgrade of attendance at the swearing-in ceremony of Muizzu, as India's Minister of Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju was present on behalf of the Indian Government, in comparison to the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, who was the only head of state present, at the signing in of previous incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.<sup>77</sup>

While India's cheque book diplomacy may not be able to match China's, India's aid is substantial, transparent, good-willed, reliable, and serves the developmental interests of Maldives.<sup>78</sup> India's contributions in maritime security, humanitarian assistance, medical aid, disaster relief, and peoples welfare, through various initiatives such as the Maldives National Défense Force Coast Guard Harbour , first responder during the attempted coup in 1988, the assistance in providing essential medicines during COVID-19 pandemic, and many more, show that a relationship with India stands to benefit the people of Maldives, and in the balance of winning or losing, Maldives has more to lose than gain, if relations with India turn acrimonious.<sup>79</sup> Given India's historical ties and close proximity to the Maldives, coupled with China's recent keen interest in its strategic position within the Indian Ocean for security, trade, and surveillance, it's likely that Malé will remain sensitive to India's overarching concerns regarding China. It's important to note that as Muizzu's presidency is still in its early stages, Malé will probably pursue increased backing from China for infrastructure and connectivity projects within the country. However, the competition between India and China to uphold their spheres of influence in the Maldives mirrors similar dynamics seen elsewhere in South Asia.



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