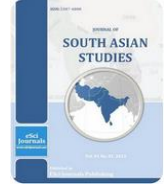




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IDEAS, MALDIVES-CHINA RELATIONS AND BALANCE OF POWER DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Today we observe an enhanced development cooperation between the Maldives and China. This article discusses a constructivist viewpoint about Maldives-China relations and their relational impact on the state of power dynamics in the South Asia region. It makes two conceptual claims: first, that Maldives-China relations are shaped by mutual ideas about development cooperation and second, that an intersubjective process of foreign policy making has influenced the power dynamics in South Asia. According to this ideational framework, coalition or alliance is formed and shaped by ideas constitutive of individual preferences of the Maldives towards China rather than traditional power arrangements between South Asian neighbours. It explains that foreign policy interests of the Maldives are not exclusively shaped by materialist and strategic positions of other states in South Asia.

Keywords: China, Maldives, South Asia, regional balance of power, constructivism, foreign policy.

INTRODUCTION

It was not an overstatement when Andrew Small commented in *Foreign Affairs* that 'the Maldives is shaping up to be the regional test case for 2018' (Small, 2018). This is particularly true at a time of rising media coverage about contagious aspects of growing economic endeavours between the Maldives and China in the South Asia region (Das, 2017; Jahangir, 2013; Kumar, 2012; Tiezzi, 2018). Recent foreign policy decisions indicate that their relationship has been built on economic and mutual grounds and has no negative implications to regional power dynamics (Presidents Office, 2014; State Council of PRC (2014).

This article discusses a constructivist viewpoint of Maldives-China relations as opposed to the traditional balance of power dynamics or power dynamics in South Asia region. It makes two conceptual claims: first, that Maldives-China relations are shaped by mutual ideas about development cooperation and second, that an intersubjective process of foreign policies making has influenced the power dynamics in South Asia. According to this ideational framework, a coalition or

alliance is formed and shaped by ideas constitutive of individual preferences of the Maldives towards China rather than traditional power arrangements between South Asian neighbours. This is not to reject any realist or neorealist claim that China has a strategic interest to balance India by establishing relations with the Maldives or other states in South Asia (Jahangir, 2013). (Also see Antola, 2002, p. 74-75; Browning, 2006; Cornett, 2016; Hellmann & Wolf, 1993; Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007; Schweller, 2016, p. 4; Jervis, 1978, pp. 172-173; Keohane, 1969, 1984, 1989; Paul, Wirtz and Fortmann, 2004; Wivel, 2005, p. 395; Walt 1985; Waltz, 1979, p. 131). India and other observers including the United States may see China's global expansion as a security concern (Das, 2017; Jahangir, 2013). This view reflects the realist aspect of Maldives-China relations and how it could affect South Asian power dynamics. The constructivist viewpoint discussed in this article explains that an alliance may be made for other reasons that are (inter)subjective to the parties involved (see Kowert, 2001, pp. 162-163). The regional power structure may have a minimal role in shaping those alliances (Adler, 2012; Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2008; Widmaier, 2005; Wicaksana, 2009). Here, the Maldives-China relations is understood as a

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construction of intersubjective understanding built on ideas generated and shared by the two states about each other and their efforts of economic cooperation for mutual development purposes. This means that this article presents an alternative view that stresses a positive (or 'nicer') aspect of this regional alliance system that may not necessarily threaten regional power dynamics.

This article undertakes a qualitative discourse analysis of foreign policy statements, media commentary and scholarly studies about the Maldives-China relations. It observes that foreign policy is a practice between two or more states that defines and structures the nature of their relations. It claims that ideas define the integration and formulation of their foreign policies (see Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2008; Widmaier, 2017). Discourse presents the narrative or statement made by actors (or states) about each other. In this respect, discourse can find or present the ideas constitutive of foreign policies. This policy discourse may appear in formal statements or speeches, government policy documents, memorandum of understandings and joint-action plans, and information provided in media material. An analysis of these documents can explain what ideas and how they have shaped foreign relations between the Maldives and China (see Daddow, 2018). This article finds that such sources show how the Maldives has welcomed China's economic programs in South Asia, specifically the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative launched by the Chinese government in 2013 (Das, 2017). This article explores sources informing the politico-economic ideas of the Maldives related to the OBOR initiative and how those ideas are shared between China and the Maldives for mutual economic gains.

The following section presents the constructivist conceptual framework to understand ideational (and intersubjective) aspects of foreign policy and regional power dynamics. The subsequent three sections present a constructivist assessment of what ideas constructed the meaning of Maldives-China relations and how those ideas generated and shared between the two states shaped their respective foreign policies. These sections explain how certain ideas constitutive of political and economic interests of political actors shaped the foreign policy of the Maldives to enhance the country's cooperation with China. They explain how the intersubjective structure of foreign relations explains the changing regional power dynamics. The

conclusion summarizes the findings and stresses the importance of ideas in future analyses of power dynamics in the region.

CONCEPTUALIZING IDEATIONAL ASPECT OF REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

International relations (IR) literature covers the geopolitics and regional power dynamics in South Asia. The politics and security of this region is historically founded on the power dynamics built on geostrategic or geopolitical policies of India and Pakistan. Empirical evidence since the post-colonial era depicts South Asia as a strategically important group of states, with India and Pakistan as nuclear-armed states. Power dynamics in the region is predominantly shaped by military capabilities and strategic foreign policy actions of these two countries. Both theoretical and empirical discoveries regarding South Asian politics have strongly implicated that power politics in the region are dominated by internal and external balancing with respect to India and Pakistan. Theoretical schools have been dominated by this neorealist assertion of regional power dynamics and alliance formation in South Asia (Ganguly & Scobell, 2005; Jahangir, 2013; Thomas, 2004). While post-colonial IR literature has covered significant studies about internal and external balancing with respect to these nuclear-armed states, more recent IR and IPE literature have also evolved around observations and analyses about China-South Asia relations and China's growing influence in the region. Most have talked about the growing economic relations between South Asian states and China despite the security concerns raised by India and foreign policy scholars about the impact China can have on regional power dynamics (see Cheng & Wankun, 2002; Chung, 2018; Das, 2017; Kumar, 2012; Rasheed, 2016). However, few studies have been on states such as the Maldives displaying an unorthodox approach that does not primarily involve interests of bandwagoning or regional balancing in the traditional sense when seeking relations with China (Rasheed, 2016).

In this respect, a constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis provides an alternative to the neorealist balance of power structure by taking ideas as a causal variable shaping foreign policy decisions. Constructivism reflects the growing post-Cold War IR scholarship about how states categorized as materially weak (or small states) act in an unorthodox manner towards shaping international system design (Browning, 2006; Chong &

Maass, 2010; Flockhart, 2008, p. 79; Kowert, 2001, pp. 162-163, Lee & Smith, 2010; Panke, 2012; Simpson, 2006; Wendt, 1999, 1992). As opposed to traditional state practice, materially weak states have made foreign policy decisions independent of what powerful states have prescribed for in the state-system design. A classic constructivist case is post-Cold War North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) settlements (Flockhart, 2008; Houghton, 2007). New relations between Central and Eastern European states and the Western Bloc were not only driven by military properties but also by an exchange of ideas and knowledge about democracy. This phenomenon of shared ideas is explained by constructivists in terms of how social interactions and foreign policy practices (i.e. diplomacy and negotiations) shape state behaviour and define resulting state-systems (see Adler, 2012; Flockhart, 2008; Wicaksana, 2009; Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999, 1992).

Constructivists see the international system as a social construction of states where shared ideas or beliefs from an intersubjective understanding among states about the type of relationships they prefer and the objectives they want to achieve. This ideational phenomenon involves a process of construction of meaning between states (and leaders representing states) making the international system 'what states make of it', as Alexander Wendt (1992, p. 395) puts it (Adler 2012; Blyth 2002; Flockhart 2008; Widmaier, 2005, 2017). Wendt (1999, p. 22) explains:

The character of international life is determined by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other, and these are constituted largely by social rather than material structures. This does not mean that material power and interests are unimportant, but rather that their meaning and effects depend on the social structure of the system ...

This means that ideas can be generated independently under different structural (or institutional) conditions depending on the way in which states interpret those conditions and objectives they want to achieve (Blyth 2002, Béland 2009). Both isolationist and internationalist foreign policies of the US during World War II and post-World War II were derived by an interpretation of the situation by its government at the time of events despite the similar material or military interests attached to other states. Ideas acted as an interpretive framework for national policymakers where

the US had interpreted the threat posed by Al Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks as one that merits a targeted assault on Al Qaeda to stop them—as opposed to a crusading course adopted in Iraq. Although these choices of the US had implications for international power dynamics, their foreign policy was not primarily shaped by threat or consideration of the power structures of the international system, but by the meaning generated by policymakers (see Widmaier 2017). Here, foreign policy is better understood as an intersubjective structure (Flockhart 2008; Doty, 2000; Widmaier, 2017).

That explains states' interests with respect to those of other states or systems of states (Smith, 2001). Foreign policy analysis can hence explore ideas shared among states about the situation or crisis they are involved in. Ideas shared among states can explain their perceptions about their self with respect to other(s), their foreign policy interests and state preferences as their state-systems can be explained as a product of 'intersubjective awareness' (Busse, 1999; Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2008; Smith, 2001; Wicaksana, 2009). Further, ideas shared during foreign policy practices of states (i.e. during bilateral and multilateral negotiations) continuously shape the nature of relationships and resulting state-system (Flockhart 2008; Smith, 2001; Zehfuss 2002). To quote Blyth (2002, p. 251), 'regardless of the structurally given interests one assumes to have, such structures do not come with an instruction sheet.' Rather, ideas become primary causal variables and interpretive frameworks in international system design.

Considering this intersubjective structure of a state-system, constructivist ideas can provide three intertwining functional bases to analyze foreign policy and regional power politics concerning Maldives-China relations. First, ideas are generated and shared among actors involved. It explains how ideas are initially generated at individual (or state) level to shape their foreign policy interests. In forming relationships, despite pre-existing state-system, states (or their representatives, namely political leaders) will have the capacity to generate ideas based on all opportunities available to support their target interests (Flockhart, 2008; Kowert, 2001). Before coming to policy decisions, state actors will have some idea about the nature of the situation they are in and what type of policy solutions will best serve their expectations (Blyth 2002, p. 35-36). According to Blyth, 'ideas provide agents [or actors] with both a scientific and a normative critique of the existing

economy and polity, and a blueprint that specifies how these elements should be constructed' (Blyth 2002, p. 37). In South Asia's context, despite security concerns encompassing the existing power structure between India and China, the Maldives can generate ideas about China's role as a development partner to adopt positive foreign policy engagements.

Second, during the intersubjective process of foreign policy making, ideas are also shared among involved actors (or states) to form a collective understanding on the nature of their relations (Blyth, 2002; Béland, Daniel 2009). Therefore, ideas can act as coalition builders by reducing uncertainties about the exchanges between states. In the regional system, Maldives can generate and share ideas about policy engagements with China, where those ideas can create understanding between the two to meet mutual ends. Barletta and Trinkunas (2004) explain how the Latin American Contadora states in the 1980s chose a strategy of engagement for regional cooperation based on shared identity rather than the US-influenced Cold War regional power arrangements. These states shared the belief that regional cooperation and democratic consolidation among regional neighbours was the preferred way to achieve peace and development in the region rather than forming an alliance with the US.

While understanding that ideas generated and shared among states define the nature of coalitions or relations between them, the third functional base explains that ideas can act as 'blueprints' for continuity and change of foreign policy in an international context. Ideas remain as a constant causal variable that shape and manage institutions (or foreign policy) designed to meet certain expectations (Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2008). Shared ideas inform actors about the existing and changing circumstances and shape their interests according to new expectations that are newly introduced during continued interactions. These interactions are based on an intersubjective understanding about 'what went wrong' and 'what had to be done' to create normal situations. Hence, shared ideas form social conventions through time and space that sustain particular meanings of national interests and relations between actors (Widmaier, 2017). The post-Cold War Latin American states agreed to address the problem of the escalating regional arms race—following the US's 'overturning of a twenty-five-year ban on such sales to the region in 1997'—by relying on 'shared [democratic] identity to

negotiate collaborative efforts to reduce defense spending, ban the use of landmines, and limit acquisition of air-to-air missiles' (Barletta and Trinkunas, 2004, pp. 352-353). As such, these countries did not necessarily consider using balancing strategies to address the escalation of the regional arms race. Therefore, conventions are the intersubjective agreements that manage actors' expectations (Blyth, 2002, p. 41). Regional power structure can then be understood in terms of an intersubjective understanding between the Maldives and China about the formation and exercise of their alliance.

Here, ideas can be political, social or economic. The type of ideas will depend on opportunities and the expectations held by actors during their interplay. In a climate change system, small island states will generate ideas about climate vulnerabilities and solutions to address their disproportionate vulnerability (Jaschik, 2014). Likewise, in a trading system, states will seek policies that maximize their economic gains and hence generate economic ideas constitutive of their foreign policies (Rasheed, 2016). Employing a qualitative discourse analysis approach, the following sections explore ideas constitutive of foreign policy statements about Maldives-China relations.

POLITICO-ECONOMIC IDEAS AND MALDIVES-CHINA RELATIONS

Roots of today's Maldives-China relations predominantly mirror the global economic program of China concerning its 'One Belt and One Road' (OBOR) initiative launched by President Xi Jinping's during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013 (Das, 2017). The OBOR initiative entailed the transformation of China's development and foreign aid policy objectives in the twenty-first century and became the global economic framework for achieving mutual developmental goals through connectivity between China, Asia and rest of the world. The main ideological framework behind this initiative reflected the transformation of China from a poor and weak economy to the second-largest economy of the world at the turn of the twenty-first century. It also reflected the political and policy priorities to ensure a consolidated approach to development (Haibing, 2017; Chung, 2017, p. 316). Primarily focused on China's own development and the changing international development environment, the OBOR initiative sets the strategic and economic foreign policy agenda for China to reach new global politico-economic heights.

However, unlike existing Western-based economic programs, the OBOR initiative has taken characteristics of economic cooperation and diplomacy that do not impose political conditions on internal affairs of its partnering states (Yanbing & Ying, 2012, p. 32; Xinhuanet, 2017; State Council of PRC, 2014). Recalling former Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen's interpretation of Chinese leaders' beliefs about the post-Cold War international system, Cheng (2017, pp. 238-239) noted that they see the world as a multipolar system where states should be treated equally and achieve mutual benefit through consensus building and respecting differences. States should 'engage in friendly co-operation, not engage in confrontation, not form an alliance, and not act against the interests of a third state.' It reflects fundamental principles of peaceful coexistence, namely 'respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; non-aggression; and peaceful co-existence' constitutive of the foreign policy China (Cheng, 2017, p. 240). It also seeks the development of 'infrastructure and connectivity, industry and trade, financial integration, policy coordination and greater people-to-people exchanges in the developing regions and particularly in Asia' (Chung, 2018; Das, 2017, p. 126).

President Xi's statement at the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 14 May 2017 presents the basic ideas about China's new foreign policy (Xinhuanet, 2017):

...15th century, Zheng He, the famous Chinese navigator in the Ming Dynasty, made seven voyages to the Western Seas. ... These pioneers won their place in history, not as conquerors. ... Rather, they are remembered as friendly emissaries. ... Generation after generation, the silk routes travellers have built a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation. ... These routes enabled people of various civilizations, religions and races to interact with and embrace each other with an open mind. ...The ancient silk routes were not for trade only, they boosted the flow of knowledge as well. ... More importantly, the exchange of goods and know-how spurred new ideas. For example, Buddhism originated in India, blossomed in China and was enriched in Southeast Asia. ... If we take the first courageous step towards each other, we can embark on a path leading to friendship, shared

development, peace, harmony and a better future. ... Global growth requires new drivers, development needs to be more inclusive and balanced, and the gap between the rich and the poor needs to be narrowed. ... [And OBOR's initiative] aims to complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths.

According to President Xi (Xinhuanet, 2017), since 2013 China has launched several trades and investment projects throughout Asia, including South Asia, as an important part of this initiative (Chung, 2018, Das, 2017). This observation, however, does not claim that China's strategic motives behind its economic expansion policy are unreal and avoidable. A strategic approach to China's global politics, especially the neorealists accounts of power dynamics, is methodologically isolated from the analysis of this article in view of presenting the ideational aspects of Maldives-China relations.

As part of the strategic maritime circle of OBOR initiative linking to South Asia regions, today the Maldives has become an important development partner of China. South Asia is a crucial strategic and economic area of Beijing's maritime ambition (Chung, 2018, p. 317). The Maldives views the China's economic approach to international relations through the OBOR initiative as highly and mutually beneficial opportunities for national development purposes (Gayoom, 2014; President's Office, 2014a).

IDENTITY OF A SMALL (ISLAND) STATE

The Maldives is a small island archipelagic state placed in the Indian Ocean, south-southwest of India (3°C15'N 73°00'E) with a population of about 350,000 located across some 1,100 islands, where two-thirds of the population live in the capital city Male'. Its strategic and regional area is South Asia. Predominantly capitalized by the tourism industry since the 1970s, its current economy shows robust growth projections for future economic and political opportunities, hence scope for competitive development engagements (Asian Development Bank, 2015).

As a developing country, the political economy of the Maldives is shaped by the interplay of national activity and the international development agenda. In the development context, such states depend significantly on external aid and unique foreign relations to ultimately build a resilient political system (Khaleel,

1999). The Maldives also embodies characteristics of a developmental state undergoing democratic transition. Historically since its independence from the British in the 1960s, the politics of Maldives has evolved to show strong links to political authority and a heavily controlled economy. Constitutional evolution from the 1970s to present day has taken different folds of political change. Prior to 2008, an authoritative ruler controlled the economy and legislative process to preserve dictatorial rule. Post-2008 brought democratic ideas and constitutional transformation. However, the first democratically elected president was ousted by an alleged coup d'état in 2012 (Rasheed 2013). More importantly, power-oriented political leaders continue to play a parental role in the national development process (Rasheed, 2013, 2015). Reiterating that 'small justice is being served for a small state', the then succeeding president Mohamed Waheed Hassan, reminded the international community in his statement to the UN General Assembly in September 2012, that 'it is regrettable but true, that some powerful international actors have come out in public and instructed the Maldives to take certain measures contradictory to our laws' (Minivan News 2012). Despite international pressure to reinstate democratic best practice (The Guardian 2015; Reuters 2016), succeeding political offices succumbed power-oriented behaviour in governing the political economy. This was evident in the presidential elections of 2013 when the election outcome was interfered by a power-oriented judicial process that favoured the prevalence of historical political ideas aligned with autocratic practices (Evan 2013; Rasheed 2013). The winning candidate and the current president who took office as of the 2013 election portrayed strong political characteristics to ensure continuity and stability of his political office. In his inauguration speech, elected president stressed that 'rising out of political turmoil and establishing peace is a big responsibility as Maldives' president and head of state.' He continued that:

Today the Maldives is in a deep economic pit, ... [and] the state budget's expenses are extremely high. We have to prioritize by reducing state expenditure. I will start work very soon.... [and] when you fall get up and run. When you lose, be courageous and in victory, be magnanimous. We will decide our own affairs' (Aljazeera 2013; Robinson, 2013).

These characteristics fundamentally represent the type of political ideas constitutive of policy objectives of governments in power. Political leaders and policymakers today view that, despite the smallness, the Maldives faces similar challenges experienced by other large and small states in the global marketplace, and hence seeks a competitive agenda for development on national and international (or regional) fronts. For example, historical post-colonial state ideas about dependence on international systems to build political resilience and sovereignty still exist in domestic political practice and foreign policymaking. However, the country's foreign policy approach and direction seemed to have changed today. Recent events have shown a change from a dependence model to a choice and preference model in the Maldives. The West-based development cooperation systems that imposed conditions on internal affairs (Yanbing & Ying, 2012: 30) were not the preferred drivers of the country's political interests and foreign policy. This behaviour was clearly seen when the Maldives exited the Commonwealth for allegedly treating the government in power 'unjustly' (The Guardian, 2016). President Yameen stated in his Independence Day remarks in 2017:

Today, we have moved our national strive beyond our boundaries, into the international arena to compete with professionals and experts of international stature. Today the national debate should be about whether we as a nation, have what it takes to strive and win the international race. While Maldivian athletes have risen to compete in regional finals our students are contesting in the highest recognized global academic awards. This is the time for us to dedicate all our energy and resources to win in the race for excellence. ... In the past four years, we have undertaken developmental work, unparalleled to any other developmental era. (President's Office, 2017a)

Moreover, the political and economic institutions of the Maldives, market system built of international tourism and foreign investments, allow it to play an independent and competitive role in foreign affairs (Jaschik, 2014; The Guardian, 2017). In a historical institutional context, pre-2008 authoritarian political practices (as informal rules) have remained embedded in the present political system to extents that have enabled the rise of political leaders who can pursue individualistic and self-

interested policy objectives (Rasheed, 2013). Such ideas about state run capitalist economy have shaped active foreign policy making.

For example, not too long-ago president Yameen's statement reiterated this view:

Maldivian Constitution was drafted and crafted on a Presidential System. ... Another significant feature of the presidential system is that the State and the Government will continue to function through the Head of State and Government, even without commanding the majority of the legislature. Constitutional frameworks are designed in this manner to ensure that the interests of the State reign supreme. ...The battle, to keep influential colonial powers at bay, now emerges with fuel from within the Maldives. ... Peace and tranquillity is the Maldivian Brand Name. The Maldives is "paradise on earth". Maldivians are the icons for hospitality and friendly hospitability. The endless stretches of white sandy beaches are a safe haven, even for the most vulnerable of small birds. (President's Office, 2017a).

Using constitutional and sovereign rights of the state, the political offices have generated ways to manipulate the policy system as per their target objectives—as prescribed in political science literature, political offices function to sustain their roles in power (Béland 2009; Rasheed 2013). Such beliefs and political sentiments began to influence new foreign policy orientation since 2013. Concluding her speech at the UN General Assembly in October 2015, then foreign minister Dunya Maumoon declared the Maldives' approach to foreign affairs:

Fifty years ago, when we applied for UN Membership, there were those that doubted our ability to survive and questioned our capacity to contribute. After fifty years of being a UN member, I say to those sceptics. ...We are not only willing but also able! ...We are not only viable but also valuable! And as Maldivians, we are proud of what we have achieved. (Maldives Mission 2015).

In 2015, then president Yameen further stated in a speech about fifty years of UN membership that:

The UN is the biggest family with most members. Political and diplomatic organisations and associations exist within this family. These organisations and associations sometimes act as

policeman, criticizing and penalizing small nations over events that occur in small nations. ... There will be no stability if one country can interfere in another's internal affairs and there are not many things the UN can do when such interferences occur. ... I would like to highlight that we can only move forward, and be respected if we are a self-sufficient, strong economy which can stand on its own feet. We see that in pursuit of the rights Maldivians have been prevented from realizing, empowering its people economically would be a great stride for Maldivian domestic affairs. ... [and] we are trying to find easier ways for us to have access to aid by bringing in big investments. (Maldives Independent 2015).

In these political conditions, China can provide a window of opportunity for Maldives' new foreign policies. The overarching element of non-interference in internal affairs embedded in the foreign policy of China can particularly serve the mentioned political purposes of the Maldives in meeting its newly set development agenda.

SHARED IDEAS AND FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE

In the turn of the new millennium, the Maldives and China started to deepen their relations in both bilateral and multilateral (or regional) contexts. Prior to the 2012 political change, the government welcomed Chinese cooperation, but mostly within the boundaries of the South Asian political system, i.e. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Meeting with the Chinese delegation in Maldives, then president Mohamed Nasheed said 'his country attaches importance to developing its friendly and cooperative relations with China and will continue to firmly support China on issues concerning its core interests' (Chinese Embassy 2011). In his first statement at the UN General Assembly in 2009, president Nasheed particularly stressed India's support in nation building when he stated that 'we are very grateful for the support extended to us by the [International Monetary Fund] IMF and the Indian Government to name but two' (UN 2009). Although previous government did not particularly disfavour China, enhanced avenues of cooperation between the Maldives and China through a rise in engagements including the exchange of bilateral visits by leaders of both countries was seen after the 2013 elections. In his visit to China to attend the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Youth Olympics in August

2014, president Yameen reiterated interests of the Maldives in positively responding to the OBOR initiative of China. Concurrently, during his visit to the Maldives later that year, Chinese President Xi expressed confidence that China is committed to supporting the Maldives and furthering their relationship through this initiative (Rasheed, 2016). In his remarks honouring President Xi's visit to the Maldives, President Yameen reiterated that:

... the Maldives and China enjoy excellent bilateral relations and development cooperation, based on mutual trust and understanding and strengthened by people-to-people exchanges at all levels. [And that] the Maldives is honoured to now feature among China's partners in building the twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road - a unique vision of President Xi, which will bring Asian neighbours closer together. ... We decided at the Official Talks that, in order to implement our shared vision and desire to advance bilateral relations and socioeconomic development cooperation, China and the Maldives would forge a "Future-Oriented All-Round Friendly and Cooperative Partnership" (Gayoom, 2014).

The leadership of the Maldives perceived China's global economic plan could support its development effort without having traditional aspects of foreign interference in domestic affairs. As China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson reiterated in connection with February 2018 political strife in the Maldives:

... what is happening inside the Maldives is the internal affairs of the country. ... The international community shall play a constructive role on the basis of respecting the sovereignty of the Maldives, instead of further complicating the situation. ... [And] we believe that the Maldives government, political parties and people have the wisdom and capability to cope with the current situation on their own' (Tiezzi, 2018).

The Maldives believes China's approach of mutual respect is appealing and has grounds for enhanced relations. Government press release noted the then vice president of the Maldives Ahmed Adheeb Abdul Ghafoor expressing 'China as one of the closest friends, and one of the most important development partners of Maldives' (President's Office 2015). Ideas about shared gains, coexistence and non-interference in domestic affairs have forged the Maldives' foreign policy towards

China and have established bilateral agreements that since then have paved the way to shape national development projects and regional and international identity of the Maldives.

In 2014, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Maldives and China on Jointly Promoting the Construction of Maritime Silk Road (see President's Office, 2014a; Rasheed, 2016). Under this initiative, several projects have been underway in the Maldives under OBOR's foreign aid scheme. Amongst key projects include US\$210 million 'Friendship Bridge' project connecting Male' and Hulhule (the airport island) and a US\$800 million International Airport expansion project alongside the several other infrastructure development projects including tourism cooperation and bilateral engagements for socio-economic development (Chung, 2018, p. 323; Rasheed 2016). Development of the international airport will not only enhance travel between the Maldives and China, but it will also enable wider and easier access for other international travellers. Infrastructure development through the Friendship Bridge project will support overall development and support social and economic activity within the country's main population areas. Vice president of the Maldives China Trade and Cultural Organization was quoted saying that:

There will be several benefits from the bridge, but I believe the most important one is the hope for the youth. ...The Maldives never witnessed such a mega infrastructure project. Now that it is complete, every Maldivian youth who crosses it will learn to dream of bigger and better projects. We can now think of having a Maldivian Dream. (Xinhuanet, 2018).

Developmental benefits of this project include enhancing connectivity between an overcrowded capital city and the newly reclaimed development and housing zones allocated in Hulhumale island. Xinhuanet (2018) reported that the bridge is indeed the first and most important brick for a permanent solution for housing issues in the Male' region.' Such bilateral engagements have created room for enhanced political commitment and public confidence in the Maldives to work with China for mutual gains (President's Office, 2014a; Shaahunaaz, 2016).

The domestic significance of China's projects also created public demand and policy interests to further enhance cooperation with China including the passage of

legislation to allow for foreign ownership of land—a development that facilitated foreign investments of China to develop land-based private projects including tourism investments (Reuters 2015; Asia-Pacific Edition 2018). Such engagements were not without political controversy. For example, the international airport development project was not primarily designed to attract Chinese investments; it was however initiated as a US \$511 million development contract project with an Indian company during former president Nasheed's leadership (Sharma 2012). Following the alleged political coup in 2012 (Rasheed, 2013), the succeeding governments did not choose to honour this agreement (Chung, 2018, pp. 322-332; Ramachandran, 2018). Instead, as part of projects placed under the OBOR initiative in 2014, the development of the international airport was awarded to China. Although such initiatives generate opposition allegations about China's 'land grabbing' practices in the Maldives, such foreign policy initiatives have merely served the policy and political intents of policymakers or political leaders. Rather than viewing China's investment developments including the establishment of property ownership in the Maldives as a negative interference in the sovereign territory of Maldives, policymakers see them as mutual development engagements (Reuters 2015). The government rejects such political controversies raised by opposition political commentaries that particularly portray China's engagements as expansionism. In relation to the adoption of foreign ownership of land, president Yameen was reported saying that the 'Maldives had assured India and other neighbouring countries that it would keep the Indian Ocean a demilitarized zone' (Reuters 2015). Economic development minister of Maldives Mohamed Saeed commented against former president Nasheed's allegation about 'land grabbing' aspects of Chinese engagement:

Nasheed is very detached from the reality. He is trying to confuse the system [i.e. development partnership between the Maldives and China]. He is trying to tell a different story to the world, which is far from reality. ... We do encourage countries including China to come to invest in the Maldivian tourism sector, that does not mean 'grabbing land' from our country. (Asia-Pacific Edition 2018).

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang later assured that:

The Maldives has the capability to protect the security of Chinese personnel and institutions in the Maldives with all-out efforts. Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China has been following the development of the situation in the Maldives and believes that the Maldivian government and people have the wisdom and capability to properly handle the current problem and resume the normal national order in accordance with the law. China will not interfere in the internal affairs of the Maldives, and this is also a basic norm of international relations enshrined in the UN Charter. (The Sunday Leader 2018).

During the February 2018 political turmoil mentioned above, spokesman Shuang was quoted concurring that:

The international community should play a constructive role on the basis of respecting the sovereignty of the Maldives rather than take actions that may further complicate the situation. (Dasgubta 2018).

As the Maldives believed in development cooperation that does not interfere with political and government affairs of the state, China's foreign policy attitude towards the Maldives became more appealing than external criticisms of its government. Reciprocal ideas held by China and the Maldives about non-interference of internal politics constructed what cooperation with China was meant for the Maldives.

The partnership or intersubjective understanding between the two states may also generate questions about their relational impact on regional security and stability. In the regional context, India has always been the main development and strategic partner of the Maldives (Chung, 2018). The foreign minister of Maldives, Mohamed Asim in 2017 reconfirmed its 'India First policy and emphasized that the Maldives attached the highest priority to its ties with India' (Ramachandran, 2018). The Maldives maintains constant foreign policy stands with India based on principles of friendship and coexistence for regional integration and development. Hence, the Maldives does not consider that partnering with China on development grounds will affect its relations with India, nor any other South Asian neighbours. The Maldives does not believe its partnership with China is built on a balance of power politics architecture. President Yameen noted in his statement at the China-Maldives Business Leaders forum:

In the last 4 years of my administration, both countries have worked very closely on a number of fronts. Trade, investment and people to people exchanges have shown remarkable growth, enabling the two nations to forge closer economic ties at unprecedented levels. ... Following the initial dialogues, I had with the business community in 2014, with a view to broadening commercial engagement with the Chinese business community, Maldives took part in the 4th South Asia Exhibition in Kunming as the Country of Honor and convened the second Maldives Investment Forum in the City of Beijing. (President's Office, 2017b)

Similarly, President Xi noted in his remarks:

We both agree that China and Maldives are friends who can help each other and partners who can work with each other. We have a great future ahead for our bilateral relations. ... China always sees the Maldives as its close friend and sincere partner. The Chinese side always respects the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Maldives, and respect the political systems and development paths chosen by the Maldivian people based on their own national condition. China will commit itself to establish friendly and cooperative relations with the Maldives based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. (President's Office, 2014b)

Here, it can be observed that shared ideas about mutual gain and development shaped the foreign policy of the Maldives towards enhanced cooperation with China. The next section looks at the same ideas constitutive of foreign policy interests acted as interpretive frameworks or blueprints for the Maldives and China to engage with each other in the regional contexts as well.

INTERSUBJECTIVE STRUCTURE AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIA

Recent literature on South Asia has discussed possible regional power vacuums that could be created by the growing interactions of China in the region (Das, 2017; Kumar, 2016). Some studies have discussed China's engagements in the territorial periphery of the Maldives and plausible cause of a threat to regional security (Ghosh, 2017; Chung, 2018). However, such studies primarily reflect the realist observation of alliances and their regional impacts (Pararajasingham, 2017).

This article shows that the Maldives sees China as a development partner (see Chung, 2018; President's

Office, 2014a; President's Office, 2014b). The notion is that the Maldives is more inclined towards building development partnership with external partners and that such partnership has been shaped by its political interests to build relations with actors that do not interfere with internal affairs (Asim, 2016; Kumar, 2012). China's approach to foreign aid and development cooperation aligns with such political ideologies of the Maldives today. Their relational impact on regional power dynamics can also be framed in the same ideational or intersubjective structure of foreign policy.

The material power element is not eliminated from this ideational approach to state identity or foreign policy in regional politics (see Wendt, 1999, p. 22). The constructivist ideational framework only observes the formation of the alliance as an intersubjective process. However, the outcome of this intersubjective interpretation of the engagement between the Maldives and China can also have a materially significant impact on regional power dynamics. The reality is that China's economic engagements in the Maldives and other states of South Asia have been portrayed not only by India's policymakers but by a broad range of policy analysts and IR scholars as an act of modern expansionism (see Jahangir, 2013; Kumar, 2012, 2016; Pararajasingham, 2017). Taking a historical viewpoint of geo-strategic location of the Maldives and strategic interests of international powers in the region during the post-colonial era, newcomer China's presence in the regional periphery of the Maldives is seen as a realist strategic concern for power balance in the region (Kumar, 2012). For example, the Maldives signed its first Free-Trade Agreement (FTA) with China in December 2017. This agreement is in essence a formal endorsement of cooperation on the OBOR initiative and opened avenues of close cooperation and reach between the two (The Indian Express 2018). An important feature of the FTA is a high-level tariff reduction. As the first country to enter into a FTA with the Maldives, China gets the privilege of securing a market access treatment that is decidedly more concessional for its enterprises (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2017). To this end, China's presence in the territorial periphery of the Maldives extends security concerns for regional observers of this FTA regarding the increase of strategic leverage for China in South Asia and Indian Ocean region (Jacob, 2018; Kumar, 2012). As Jacob (2018) reported:

The Maldives-located around 700 km from Indian

shores—has become a showpiece of mega projects-driven Chinese foreign policy as well as an important player in President Xi Jinping's marquee one-road-one-belt project. Chinese presence in the island nation has been growing steadily ever since Beijing opened an embassy in Male in 2011, about 37 years after India set up its mission there.

An Indian strategic affairs expert reference was quoted saying that (Jacob, 2018):

China has used inducements and investments on a significant scale to strategically penetrate the Maldives, which is now slipping into a debt trap. ...China's support has spurred the Maldives' unbridled lurch toward authoritarianism. Without being able to count on China's support, Yameen wouldn't have behaved the way he did recently.

Ironically though the Maldives did not have particular foreign policy positions regarding China's strategic expansion in the region. The government only continued to reassure that the FTA has mutual development benefits and avoided any strategic expansionist theories about China.

President Yameen commented on this achievement that, 'the free trade agreement between China and Maldives signed during the visit [i.e. his visit to China in 2017] was a milestone in the development of China-Maldives economic and trade relations' (Reuters 2017). The Ministry of Commerce of China reported that:

The agreement covers trade in goods, trade in services, investment and economic and technical cooperation and meets the all-around, high-level, mutually beneficial and win-win negotiation goal. This agreement will provide a solid institutional guarantee for the liberalization and facilitation of bilateral trade and investment and will help promote the deepening of the two sides' practical cooperation in related areas and constantly enhance the wellbeing of the two countries' enterprises and people. (The Ministry of Commerce of China 2017)

President Yameen was quoted saying during the same visit to China that, '[China is] amongst our closest friends, most trusted and most dependable partners, [and that] OBOR has greatly helped the development of small and medium countries [i.e. including South Asian economies]' (Dasgubta, 2017). Moreover, economic engagements with China are undertaken to serve the

interests of the Maldives irrespective of what presence of China in South Asia could mean for other regional neighbours.

In review, the recent February 2018 political turmoil in the Maldives, the Maldivian ambassador to China Mohamed Faisal raised concerns about a strategic dilemma concerning Maldives-China relations by saying that:

We [i.e. the Maldives] have been caught up in this new way that the world is looking at China. ... It is part of a global trend now – a lot of people are seeing what China is doing because, in terms of both economically and global power, China is rising. ... There has been tension and pressure on the Maldives ... the talk of debt traps, land grabs in the nation is because we have been working with China. If we were working with India or the US, people would not be talking. (South China Morning Post 2018).

Ambassador Faisal further reiterated and expressed confidence about positive intentions behind the relations with China by explaining the Maldives' foreign policy strands regarding China and regional partners including India. His statement included that:

We are looking for foreign investments to assist us in building port facilities. We welcome all countries, not just China. It is an open invitation. ...We have taken a lot of our projects to India as well, but we did not receive the necessary finance. ... China is like a long-lost cousin that we have found, a long lost cousin who is willing to help us. India is a brother. ... [And] we are a family, we may quarrel, and we may have arguments but in the end, we will sit down and resolve it. ... Our government has made it very clear that we are not going to allow any kind of military establishments or military undertakings in the Maldives. Not for China, not for any other countries (South China Morning Post 2018)

The Maldives is open to form a coalition with foreign countries based on interests for mutual gains. Its foreign policy purposes are shaped by ideas about establishing development cooperation with any country that supports its political and economic agenda for development. Therefore, the Maldives does not believe that its investment cooperation through FTA and other agreements with China can cause any threat to the region.

Ideas as conventions in the form of intersubjective agreements can manage this identity through time and space. This means the way in which the Maldives-China relations affect the regional power dynamics is also managed by these conventions which basically enable the Maldives to interpret its engagements with China based on ideas about mutual respect and non-interference of internal affairs. A question of intention and preference is apparent here. This reflects a lack of hostility in foreign relations. For example, coexisting means acting under mutual interests, and hence at the time, China has the interest to protect its interests in the Maldives and vice versa. Political stability is a key to investor confidence and hence to reciprocally ensuring confidence in their governments remains a key understanding under the OBOR commitments. (President's Office 2014a; Joshi, 2018). China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang stated in a press conference that its relations with the Maldives serve the common interests of the two countries and the two peoples (Chinese Embassy in Australia 2018). On the other hand, in February 2018, India may have seen any reported naval engagements of China in the Indian Ocean as a threat; but it does not necessarily shape the foreign policy purposes of the Maldives. China's reaction to the political situation in the Maldives was more favourable to the government in power. As China may seek to protect its interest in the Maldives, it also serves the interests of Maldives' leadership to guarantee political resilience. Spokesperson Shuang stated that '[furthermore] China believes that the relevant disputes arising in the Maldives are the internal affairs of that country and should be properly resolved through dialogue and negotiation by various parties in the Maldives' (Chinese Embassy in Australia 2018). The Maldives seeks its own political security within the region, but its regional security interests are shaped by ideas about economic cooperation that will also build domestic political resilience.

In this intersubjective structure, the Maldives may not have advocated for China's strategic support in an event of a regional conflict with neighbouring states. However, China's naval activity in the Indian Ocean at the same time when there was an alleged political confusion between the Maldives and its South Asian neighbours may have served for a strategic advantage to the Maldives (Joshi, 2018). This effect of strategic relations is also a property of their intersubjective structure of

power dynamics. If India and other regional neighbours perceive that China in the equation can offset the balance of power, one can understand the strategic and possibly negative implications of Maldives-China relations to the regional power dynamics. This does not mean that the Maldives' relations with China was shaped by India's power structure in the region. Nor has it been shaped to balance India. This understanding of power dynamics does not change the way in which the Maldives and China can perceive their relational impact on regional power dynamics. As discussed above, the Maldives continues to show promising relations with India despite any negative views about the regional impact of its relations with China. Any perceived negative change of power dynamics was not a construction of interplay between the Maldives and China, and hence it is likely to assert that their relationship gets shaped by shared ideas rather than a predetermined power system.

CONCLUSION

This article discusses a constructivist viewpoint to explain Maldives-China relations in the regional periphery of South Asia in view of initiating a workable experiment and understanding about the progressive development partnership between the two states. It attempts to ground a constructivist interpretation of China's engagement in the Maldives and their relational impact on South Asia. Politico-economic ideas about mutual gains through the OBOR initiative and shared between the leaders of both states shaped their foreign policies. This article also claims that a positive or a 'nicer' aspect of Maldives-China relations exists and the resultant impact on regional power dynamics. The main point is that the power system of South Asia concerning the Maldives and China is explained using ideas shared between the two rather than any other negative observations often linked to realist schools.

Claiming that ideas predominantly caused a change in foreign policy orientation, this article does not eliminate other variables including strategic and military capabilities of China that could physically offset a power balance in India and change or re-define foreign policy interests of Maldives. As the Maldives has sought to maintain political stability and international credibility in achieving development plans, the scope for it to explore bilateral and multilateral relations that can further ensure the *status quo* is also high. Presently, the foreign policy of Maldives was linked to the interests and

political targets of the executive authority. One can anticipate a change of political interests with a change of government following the September 2018 presidential elections, and this merits further research. In an unforeseen event, if the Maldives decides to halt its involvement in the OBOR projects, one can understand the lack of concerns raised by regional neighbors. However, such change of policy may not only be derived by the regional position India takes, but by a change of ideas.

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