

ANALYZING THE INDIA-MALDIVES-CHINA STRATEGIC TRIANGLE: GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Abstract

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has emerged as a pivotal arena for great power competition, with the Maldives serving as a critical node in the strategic rivalry between India and China. This research paper examines the evolution of the India-Maldives-China strategic triangle, focusing on historical foundations, economic dependencies, diplomatic shifts, and future implications. Drawing on recent developments, such as India's \$565 million credit line extended in July 2025 and the activation of the China-Maldives Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in January 2025, the analysis highlights how economic vulnerabilities, geographic proximity, and soft power shape small-state agency in multipolar dynamics. The Maldives' debt crisis, exacerbated by Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments totalling over \$1.4 billion, underscores the risks of debt diplomacy, while India's "Neighbourhood First" policy provides a counterbalance through concessional financing and security cooperation. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative insights from policy documents and quantitative data on trade, debt, and investments. Key findings reveal that while China offers rapid infrastructure development, India's cultural ties and crisis response capabilities ensure enduring influence. The paper assesses regional security risks, including militarization of the IOR, and proposes recommendations for multilateral cooperation to mitigate instability. As of August 2025, the triangle remains fluid, with implications for Indo-Pacific governance and global trade routes carrying 80% of maritime oil.

Keywords

India-Maldives-China triangle, Indian Ocean, geopolitics, debt diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, Neighbourhood First, SAGAR, small-state agency, maritime security, climate security nexus, String of Pearls.

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean, spanning over 70 million square kilometers and facilitating 80% of global maritime oil trade, stands as a linchpin of 21st-century geopolitics, where control over sea lanes shapes global power dynamics. At its heart lies the Maldives, an archipelago of 1,192 coral islands with a population of approximately 540,000, yet commanding an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 859,000 square kilometers. Strategically located 700 kilometers southwest of India's Lakshadweep and astride vital sea lanes linking the Middle East to East Asia, the Maldives holds significance far beyond its physical footprint, serving as a potential maritime chokepoint and a microcosm of broader Indo-Pacific rivalries, particularly between India and China.

Historically, India-Maldives relations have been characterized by deep cultural and security ties, rooted in shared heritage such as the Dhivehi language's Sanskrit influences. Since recognizing Maldivian independence in 1965, India has solidified its role as a security guarantor, notably through Operation Cactus in 1988, where 1,600 Indian paratroopers thwarted a coup attempt. By

In 2025, India's investments exceeded \$2.5 billion in grants and loans, funding projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Project and supporting 25,000 Maldivian students annually in Indian institutions, fostering enduring cultural and professional connections. In contrast, China's engagement accelerated with the Maldives' accession to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2014, leading to \$1.4 billion in infrastructure investments, including the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge and Velana International Airport expansion. These projects, while transformative, have contributed to a debt burden representing 70-75% of the Maldives' external obligations, raising concerns about debt-trap diplomacy akin to Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port.

Recent developments have intensified this strategic triangle. President Mohamed Muizzu's election in 2023 on an "India Out" platform initially tilted policy toward China, with demands for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel by May 2024. However, a severe debt crisis in 2025, with \$600 million in repayments due, prompted a diplomatic reset. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Male on July 25-26, 2025, coinciding with the Maldives' 60th Independence Day, resulted in 13 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) across defense, health, and infrastructure, alongside a \$565 million credit line and \$50 million debt rollover, underscoring India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision. China's strategy, driven by the "Malacca Dilemma"—where 60% of its energy imports pass through vulnerable chokepoints—focuses on securing

alternative routes through BRI projects, with the China-Maldives FTA activated on January 1, 2025, deepening ties but exacerbating debt with annual repayments of \$92 million.

The India-Maldives-China triangle has attracted significant scholarly attention within Indo-Pacific geopolitics, framed by competing theoretical perspectives. Realist frameworks view the competition as a zero-sum game, where China's rise challenges India's regional hegemony. The concept of "debt-trap diplomacy" critiques China's BRI lending, arguing it creates dependencies leading to strategic concessions, though some scholars emphasize recipient agency and nuanced lending practices. Liberal institutionalists highlight potential for cooperation through economic integration, such as FTAs and multilateral forums like the Quad, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. Small-state theory, particularly "shelter theory," explains the Maldives' hedging strategy: seeking economic shelter from China while relying on India for security and crisis response. Maritime security literature underscores China's vulnerability due to its reliance on the Malacca Strait, motivating its IOR presence. The climate-security nexus is increasingly central, with the Maldives' vulnerability—80% of islands less than one meter above sea level—amplifying the geopolitical leverage of external aid. The "String of Pearls" theory posits Chinese encirclement through ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and potentially the Maldives, heightening Indian concerns about strategic containment.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative analysis of policy documents and diplomatic statements with quantitative data on trade flows, debt structures, and investments. It employs a theoretical framework that blends structural realism with constructivist elements, emphasizing geography and identity as key determinants of outcomes, to analyze how economic statecraft, climate vulnerabilities, and small-state agency shape the strategic triangle and its implications for Indo-Pacific governance.

2. Historical Context and Geopolitical Significance

The Maldives' strategic importance is deeply rooted in its geographic position and historical evolution, which have positioned it as a critical node in the Indian Ocean's geopolitical landscape. Straddling key maritime routes that facilitate the passage of over 35,000 vessels annually, the Maldives links the oil-rich Middle East to the industrial hubs of East Asia, making it a linchpin for global trade and energy security. Its 26 atolls, spread across nine degrees of latitude, offer potential sites for surveillance, naval facilities, and logistical bases, with the northern atolls just 400 kilometers from India's Lakshadweep, amplifying its role as a strategic buffer. The

Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 859,000 square kilometers, vast relative to its landmass, further enhances its maritime significance, providing control over critical sea lanes and marine resources.

The Maldives' vulnerability to climate change, with 80% of its islands less than one meter above sea level, adds a unique dimension to its geopolitical profile. Rising sea levels and increasing storm intensity threaten the nation's physical and economic survival, given that tourism—centered on its coral reefs and beaches—contributes 30% to GDP and supports 60% of foreign exchange earnings. This environmental fragility amplifies the Maldives' reliance on external aid for adaptation and disaster preparedness, creating opportunities for great powers to wield influence through climate-focused assistance, such as coastal protection and renewable energy projects.

India-Maldives relations trace back centuries, with cultural and linguistic ties evident in the Dhivehi language's Sanskrit roots and shared Buddhist heritage before the Maldives' conversion to Islam in the 12th century. Formal diplomatic ties were established upon the Maldives' independence from British rule in 1965, with India as one of the first nations to recognize the new state. India's role as a security guarantor was cemented by Operation Cactus in 1988, when 1,600 Indian paratroopers swiftly intervened to suppress a coup attempt by Tamil mercenaries, reinforcing India's commitment to Maldivian stability. Over decades, India has invested heavily in capacity building, with over \$2.5 billion in grants and loans by 2025, funding critical infrastructure like the \$500 million Greater Male Connectivity Project, which links the capital to key economic hubs, and healthcare facilities, including the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital. Educational exchanges, with 25,000 Maldivian students attending Indian institutions annually, have fostered deep cultural and professional ties, strengthening India's soft power.

China's engagement with the Maldives began in 1972 with diplomatic recognition, but remained limited until the 21st century. The turning point came under President Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018), whose administration embraced China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2014, seeking rapid infrastructure development to bolster economic growth. China invested \$1.4 billion—equivalent to 20% of the Maldives' GDP—in transformative projects, including the \$200 million China Maldives Friendship Bridge, connecting Male to Hulhumale, and the \$400 million expansion of Velana International Airport. These investments aimed to reduce China's reliance on the Malacca Strait, a chokepoint for 60% of its energy imports, by securing alternative maritime routes and potential strategic outposts. However, the opaque terms of Chinese loans, with annual repayments of \$92 million, have fueled concerns about debt sustainability, as external debt constitutes 70-75% of the Maldives' obligations.

The Maldives' foreign policy has historically oscillated between alignment with India and openness to other powers, reflecting domestic political dynamics and economic needs. The pro-India stance of leaders like Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978-2008) contrasted with Yameen's pro-China tilt, while Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration (2018-2023) restored India-centric policies. President Mohamed Muizzu's election in 2023 on an "India Out" platform marked a sharp shift, demanding the withdrawal of Indian military personnel and aligning with China through agreements like the 2024 defense pact. Yet, the 2025 debt crisis, with \$600 million in repayments due, forced a pragmatic recalibration, culminating in India's \$565 million credit line and Modi's landmark visit. This oscillation underscores the Maldives' strategic hedging, exploiting great power competition to maximize economic and developmental benefits while navigating the risks of dependency.

The historical interplay of these relationships has been shaped by the Maldives' geographic centrality and environmental vulnerabilities, which amplify its role in great power strategies. India's proximity and historical ties position it as a natural partner for security and crisis response, while China's economic might offers rapid development but at the cost of fiscal strain. These dynamics set the stage for the contemporary strategic triangle, where economic statecraft, military posturing, and climate considerations converge to shape the Maldives' geopolitical trajectory and the broader Indo-Pacific landscape.

3. Strategic Aims, Competitive Dynamics, and Contemporary Developments

The India-Maldives-China strategic triangle is defined by the distinct yet overlapping objectives of each actor, shaped by their geopolitical priorities, competitive interactions, and recent developments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India views the IOR as its strategic backyard, critical for safeguarding its 7,500-kilometer coastline and securing 80% of its energy imports that traverse key maritime routes. The Maldives serves as a vital buffer against external incursions, with India's naval base, INS Jatayu in Lakshadweep, enhancing maritime surveillance just 400 kilometers away. India's strategic aims include maintaining regional dominance, countering Chinese expansion, and fostering stability through its "Neighbourhood First" policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision. These objectives are pursued through concessional financing, security cooperation, and soft power initiatives, such as educational exchanges supporting 25,000 Maldivian students annually and medical tourism programs. India's involvement in the Quad—alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia—bolsters its deterrence capabilities, with joint exercises like the 2025 Malabar exercise and maritime security initiatives aimed at ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. India's plans to upgrade INS Jatayu

into a full-fledged naval hub by 2027 signal a long-term commitment to regional dominance. China's strategic objectives center on securing its \$5 trillion in annual trade, particularly the 60% of its energy imports that pass through the vulnerable Malacca Strait, a chokepoint that exposes it to the "Malacca Dilemma." The Maldives offers a strategic vantage point for surveillance and potential naval access, reducing reliance on this chokepoint. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested \$1.4 billion in the Maldives, funding transformative projects like the \$200 million China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, connecting Male to Hulhumale, and the \$400 million expansion of Velana International Airport. These investments serve dual purposes: fostering economic development to gain influence and creating infrastructure with potential strategic utility, such as port facilities that could support naval operations. The 2024 defense cooperation agreement, allowing Chinese vessel access to Maldivian ports, underscores this strategic intent, raising concerns about militarization and the "String of Pearls" strategy, which posits Chinese encirclement of India through a network of ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and potentially the Maldives. Speculation about Chinese leasing of uninhabited Maldivian atolls for commercial or strategic purposes, mirroring Diego Garcia's model, has further heightened regional tensions.

The Maldives, as a small state, employs a hedging strategy to maximize benefits from both powers while preserving autonomy. By balancing India's security and cultural ties with China's economic offerings, the Maldives secures infrastructure, financial aid, and diplomatic leverage. However, this multi-alignment approach introduces volatility, as domestic political shifts drive oscillations in foreign policy. The election of President Mohamed Muizzu in 2023 on an "India Out" platform marked a significant pivot toward China, with demands for the withdrawal of approximately 80 Indian military personnel by May 2024, reflecting concerns over sovereignty and foreign influence. This move was accompanied by strengthened ties with China, including the activation of the China-Maldives Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on January 1, 2025, which boosted bilateral trade by 15% in the first quarter but deepened debt dependencies, with annual repayments to China at \$92 million. The FTA has facilitated increased Chinese imports, particularly in construction materials and technology, but has also raised concerns about trade imbalances, with Maldivian exports like fish products facing tariff barriers.

The 2025 debt crisis, with \$600 million in repayments due, forced a dramatic recalibration of Muizzu's policy. Facing fiscal insolvency and a projected GDP contraction of 2% without external support, the Maldives turned to India for relief. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Male on July 25-26, 2025, coinciding with

the Maldives' 60th Independence Day, resulted in 13 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) covering defense, health, education, and infrastructure, alongside a \$565 million credit line and \$50 million debt rollover. These agreements included initiatives like the \$136 million Hanimaadhoo Airport redevelopment, expanded training for Maldivian security forces, and a new telemedicine network linking Male to Indian hospitals. India's concessional financing, with interest rates below 2%, contrasted with China's more cautious approach to additional lending, as Beijing faced domestic economic constraints and regional scrutiny over debt practices, leading to a temporary slowdown in new BRI commitments. The visit also saw India pledge \$20 million for climate adaptation projects, including coral reef restoration, aligning with the Maldives' push for global leadership in climate resilience at COP29 in 2024.

Competitive dynamics have intensified through infrastructure rivalry and security flashpoints. India's \$500 million Greater Male Connectivity Project, linking Male to Villingili and Thilafushi, and the Addu redevelopment initiative compete directly with China's Friendship Bridge and housing projects in Hulhumale, with India leveraging grants and mixed financing to reduce debt burdens compared to China's loan-heavy model. Security tensions have escalated with Chinese research vessels, such as the Xiang Yang Hong 03, docking in Male in February 2025, prompting Indian concerns about surveillance and potential naval footholds. India responded with increased naval exercises, including the 2025 Malabar exercise with Quad partners, deploying two aircraft carriers and advanced surveillance drones, signaling robust deterrence. The Maldives' decision to allow limited Chinese naval visits under the 2024 defense pact, while maintaining Indian access to its EEZ for joint patrols, reflects its delicate balancing act.

Social media dynamics, particularly on platforms like X, have amplified these tensions. Pro-India posts highlight cultural ties, India's role in the 2004 tsunami response, and recent aid packages, while pro-China narratives emphasize infrastructure benefits and economic modernization. The 2024 #BoycottMaldives campaign on X, sparked by Muizzu's anti-India rhetoric, led to a 20% drop in Indian tourist arrivals, costing the Maldives \$150 million in revenue and underscoring the economic risks of diplomatic missteps in a tourism-dependent economy. India's soft power, through Bollywood, educational scholarships, and medical tourism, contrasts with China's growing media presence, including partnerships with Maldivian outlets to promote BRI narratives and a new Chinese cultural centre in Male, which opened in March 2025. The Maldives' engagement with other actors, such as Turkey's \$50 million investment in tourism infrastructure and Saudi Arabia's

\$30 million renewable energy fund, adds complexity, as does its observer status in Quad maritime security dialogues, signaling a broader diversification strategy.

Emerging flashpoints include the potential for Chinese leasing of uninhabited atolls, with reports in July 2025 suggesting negotiations for a commercial hub in the southern atolls, raising Indian concerns about dual-use facilities. India's counter-strategy includes a \$100 million coast guard training facility in Addu, set to be operational by 2026, and plans to station additional naval assets in Lakshadweep. The Maldives' push for climate finance has drawn support from the European Union, which pledged €15 million for coastal protection in 2025, positioning the Maldives as a global advocate for small island states. These developments highlight the triangle's fluidity, with the Maldives navigating economic imperatives, security risks, and climate vulnerabilities amid intensifying great power competition.

4. Key Research Findings

The India-Maldives-China strategic triangle reveals intricate dynamics where economic pressures, geographic realities, and soft power shape interactions. Below are the key findings, followed by A detailed analysis of their implications for the Maldives, the region, and global governance.

- **Economic Vulnerability Drives Strategic Behaviour:** The Maldives' 2025 debt crisis, requiring \$600 million in repayments, compelled a pragmatic shift toward India despite initial anti-India rhetoric, underscoring the dominance of economic imperatives over political posturing.
- **Infrastructure Investment Creates Leverage:** China's \$1.4 billion BRI projects, such as the Friendship Bridge, provide significant influence but burden the Maldives with debt, constituting 70-75% of external obligations, limiting fiscal autonomy.
- **Geographic Proximity Provides Advantage:** India's close proximity enables rapid crisis response, such as during the 1988 coup or 2025 debt crisis, ensuring enduring influence despite periodic tensions.
- **Multi-alignment Maximizes Benefits but Creates Instability:** The Maldives' strategy of balancing India and China yields economic and developmental gains but leads to policy volatility, complicating long-term planning and investor confidence.
- **Soft Power Provides Resilience:** India's cultural ties, including educational exchanges with 25,000 Maldivian students annually, sustain influence and facilitated the 2025 diplomatic reconciliation.

The Maldives' multi-alignment strategy—balancing India's security and cultural ties with China's economic might—has yielded tangible benefits, such as infrastructure development and financial aid. However, this approach introduces policy volatility, as seen in the abrupt shifts under different administrations, from Yameen's pro-China tilt to Solih's India-centric policies and Muizzu's initial anti-India stance. Such oscillations undermine investor confidence and complicate long-term development planning, as evidenced by the 2024-2025 tourism downturn following strained India relations. India's soft power, particularly through educational exchanges and cultural affinity, has proven resilient, facilitating the 2025 reconciliation and reinforcing its role as a stabilizing force.

5. Risks and Geopolitical Implications

The Maldives faces significant economic risks stemming from its escalating debt burden and dependence on a tourism-driven economy. By 2026, external debt is projected to reach \$4 billion, with approximately 25% owed to China and \$1 billion due in that year, threatening fiscal sustainability. The economy's reliance on tourism, contributing 30% of GDP, makes it vulnerable to external shocks, such as geopolitical tensions or environmental disasters. The 2024-2025 decline in Indian tourist arrivals, triggered by diplomatic frictions, underscored how political decisions can rapidly destabilize economic stability, potentially exacerbating currency volatility and import shortages, given that 90% of essential goods are imported.

Sovereignty and autonomy are increasingly at risk as dependencies on foreign loans and investments from both India and China constrain policy options. Long-term commitments embedded in loan agreements and infrastructure projects limit the flexibility of future Maldivian governments, regardless of democratic mandates. Electoral volatility further complicates consistent foreign policy implementation, as shifts in leadership often lead to abrupt reorientations, creating uncertainty for investors and undermining long-term planning. The presence of foreign military personnel and surveillance systems, even when invited, raises concerns about eroding sovereignty, potentially normalizing external interference and setting precedents for future interventions.

Regionally, the intensifying competition risks transforming the Indian Ocean from a relatively stable maritime domain into a contested strategic space. For India, the prospect of Chinese military facilities in the Maldives poses a direct threat to its ability to secure vital sea lanes, through which 80% of its energy imports flow. This could precipitate an arms race, with increased naval deployments, advanced surveillance, and missile capabilities destabilizing the region. The "String of Pearls" theory, which posits Chinese encirclement through ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and

potentially the Maldives, amplifies Indian fears of strategic containment, challenging its role as the primary security provider in the IOR.

Globally, the India-Maldives-China triangle exposes critical gaps in contemporary governance structures, where small states navigate great power competition without robust multilateral mechanisms to manage escalation. The use of economic leverage, through conditional aid and debt diplomacy, undermines principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in international law. Climate change further complicates these dynamics, transforming the Maldives' environmental vulnerabilities into strategic leverage points, as external powers exploit adaptation projects to gain influence. The absence of effective frameworks to address this intersection of security, economics, and climate risks heightens the potential for proxy conflicts and broader instability in the Indo-Pacific.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

The India-Maldives-China strategic triangle encapsulates the complexities of multipolar competition in the Indo-Pacific, offering both opportunities and challenges for small states and great powers alike. As of August 2025, the triangle remains dynamic, with India's diplomatic resurgence—marked by Prime Minister Modi's July visit, the signing of 13 MoUs, and the extension of a \$565 million credit line—partially countering China's earlier advances through the activated Free Trade Agreement and \$1.4 billion BRI projects. The Maldives' \$600 million debt repayments due in 2025 forced a pragmatic pivot toward India, highlighting how economic imperatives override political rhetoric. This interplay of economic vulnerabilities, geographic proximity, and soft power underscores the Maldives' agency in leveraging great power rivalry, but also reveals the risks of debt burdens and policy instability that threaten long-term sovereignty and development.

To navigate these challenges effectively, the Maldives must adopt a multifaceted strategy to preserve autonomy and promote sustainable growth. Diversifying partnerships beyond India and China is critical, engaging middle powers like Japan, Australia, and the European Union to secure alternative financing and technical expertise. Japan's quality infrastructure initiatives, emphasizing transparency and sustainability, offer a viable model. Implementing robust debt management reforms—such as transparent borrowing guidelines, parliamentary oversight, and regular sustainability assessments—can mitigate the risk of future crises and counter debt-trap concerns. Strengthening institutional capacity in maritime law, financial management, and project oversight will enhance negotiation leverage and ensure better development outcomes. Positioning the Maldives as a global leader in climate resilience, through initiatives like marine conservation and coastal

protection, can transform environmental vulnerabilities into diplomatic assets, attracting diverse international support and reinforcing sovereignty.

India, as a regional power, must evolve its strategy to maintain influence while fostering cooperative partnerships. Integrating “smart power” by combining its security role with technological and economic cooperation—such as renewable energy, digital connectivity, and desalination projects—can provide competitive alternatives to Chinese infrastructure. Engaging multilateral platforms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Quad will reduce bilateral tensions and advance shared interests in regional stability. Encouraging private sector investment in tourism, fisheries, and green energy will create sustainable economic ties that withstand political fluctuations. Expanding cultural diplomacy through increased educational exchanges, scholarships, and professional training will further bolster India’s soft power, building resilient connections that endure despite diplomatic frictions.

China, to sustain its influence and address regional suspicions, should adopt transparent and sustainable lending practices. Offering concessional loan terms and involving multilateral institutions in project financing can counter debt-trap criticisms and enhance credibility. Participating in regional security initiatives, such as joint disaster response or maritime safety programs, will demonstrate a commitment to cooperative security, mitigating perceptions of unilateral ambition. Improving transparency in loan agreements and clearly communicating commercial versus strategic objectives can reduce concerns about militarization, fostering greater acceptance of China’s presence in the IOR.

Multilateral solutions are essential to manage the broader implications of this triangle and prevent escalation. Developing inclusive regional security frameworks, such as expanding the East Asia Summit to include substantive maritime cooperation, can provide alternatives to zero-sum competition. Establishing sustainable development partnerships that pool resources from multiple donors while adhering to high transparency standards will reduce dependency risks for small states. Integrating climate adaptation into regional security cooperation can address environmental and strategic challenges simultaneously, creating incentives for collaborative behaviour. Strengthening international mechanisms to protect small-state sovereignty—through legal frameworks and institutional reforms—will provide guardrails for competition, ensuring that economic and security engagements align with principles of non-interference.

In conclusion, the India-Maldives-China strategic triangle serves as a bellwether for the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, where economic interdependence, geopolitical rivalry, and environmental vulnerabilities converge

to shape global power dynamics. The Maldives' adept navigation of great power competition—securing significant infrastructure and financial assistance—demonstrates the potential for small states to wield agency, but the accompanying \$4 billion debt burden by 2026 and policy volatility highlight the fragility of this approach. India's 2025 diplomatic reset, leveraging geographic proximity, cultural ties, and rapid crisis response, has reasserted its influence, while China's infrastructure investments maintain significant leverage despite debt concerns. The accelerating militarization of the Indian Ocean, driven by naval deployments and surveillance systems, threatens to transform the region into a contested space, with the "String of Pearls" amplifying India's encirclement fears. Climate change adds urgency, transforming the Maldives' vulnerabilities into strategic leverage points for external powers. The absence of robust multilateral mechanisms exacerbates these risks, underscoring the need for cooperative frameworks to prevent proxy conflicts and ensure stability.

By implementing the recommended strategies—diversification and debt reform for the Maldives, smart power and multilateralism for India, transparent lending and cooperative security for China, and inclusive regional frameworks—the actors in this triangle can transform potential flashpoints into opportunities for collaboration. Failure to pursue such approaches risks entrenching economic vulnerabilities, eroding sovereignty, and destabilizing the IOR, with ripple effects across global trade routes. The Maldives' strategic choices, though small in scale, will continue to resonate, shaping the Indo-Pacific's future as a zone of peace or conflict. Prioritizing transparency, mutual benefits, and shared prosperity is imperative to ensure the Indian Ocean remains a conduit for global growth rather than a theater of rivalry, contributing to a resilient and balanced international system amid shifting power dynamics.

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