



**THE DIGITAL SILK ROAD AND
CHINESE TECHNO-NATIONALISM IN
MALDIVES**

BY JOSHUA BOWES

Joshua Bowes (joshuabowes1@gmail.com) is a Research Associate at The Millennium Project's South Asia Foresight Network (www.southasiaforesight.org) in Washington, D.C., focusing on South Asian security challenges, political conflict and the confluence of extremism and technology.

The Maldives' [recent turn toward China over India](#) has boosted Beijing's long-term aim for regional control and disrupted New Delhi's ambition to match China's strategic competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific. On [March 12](#), the Maldives began setting into motion the expulsion of Indian troops on the archipelago, ordered by President Mohamed Muizzu. As China-Maldives diplomatic alignments strengthen, so too does China's reach across the contentious Indian Ocean Region (IOR), meaning Beijing is well on its way to becoming regional overseer. China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, presents Beijing as the Indo-Pacific's domineering power, with the Maldives being one of the first countries to join China's roster of BRI partners. The [Digital Silk Road \(DSR\)](#), a flagship project of the BRI, epitomizes Beijing's aim to direct the enhancement of global connectivity, led by Chinese technology companies and telecommunications networks. The Maldives is an integral part of the DSR; the islands' geostrategic location is [critical to China's plan](#) to establish a maritime route linking China's coastal areas to Southeast Asia, the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and beyond. The DSR poses

formidable security and espionage risks for the international community, potentially allowing China to play "king of the castle" in one of the most strategic areas of the planet.

China's recent stirring of controversy over its use of [naval patrols near Taiwan](#), as well as a [continued standoff](#) with the Philippines, has generated regional security concerns. Against this backdrop of confrontation, the Maldives remains an ambitious partner of Beijing. Over a decade ago, when the BRI was announced, a subsidiary of Huawei [signed an agreement with the Maldives](#) to build technological infrastructure in the archipelago, under the namesake of the "SMART Maldives" project. This enormous initiative is slated for completion on the island of Hulhumalé, a region of the North Malé Atoll. With investment from the [China Development Bank](#), the [Maldivian Housing Development Corporation \(HDC\)](#)—a state-owned enterprise—is set to bring the smart city to life. The SMART Maldives project would not be possible without colossal investment from China's state banks, in the billions of dollars. While there is little mention of China's involvement by the HDC, China's heavy influence in the project cannot be masqueraded. Despite being [advertised by the Maldivian government](#) as an eco-friendly and fully sustainable city, Hulhumalé is just another means for China to extend its network of influence across the region and the greater world.

In February, a Chinese research vessel [made a stop at a Malé port](#), raising concerns about China's potential future use of the Maldives as a waypoint for conducting intelligence-gathering missions in the region. The ship, *Xiang Yang Hong 03*, spent weeks [patrolling waters near India](#), Sri Lanka, as well as the Maldives. In 2021, on a previous voyage, [Indonesian authorities claimed](#) the same ship turned its tracking system off multiple times. The independent open-source intelligence analyst known as "WLVN" on X (formerly

Twitter) warned on March 6 that China was planning to provide maritime surveillance systems to the Maldives. While it is difficult to authenticate this claim, a defense pact agreed to by Beijing and Malé on March 4 approved sending non-lethal military equipment to the Maldives. The Maldives' continued use as a Chinese maritime hub along the DSR could result in collaborative military exercises and the sharing of bilateral maritime intelligence.

For China, the DSR offers multifaceted benefits. The DSR is a means of expanding Beijing's national tech corporations both in influence and in revenue, through massive market capture. Companies like Alibaba and Huawei, which already have a substantial foothold in Southeast and West Asia have servicing and operational contracts with their host nations, flooding money into China. As such, Beijing is able to augment its domestic technological capacity with this money. Additionally, China's development of connectivity in the Indo-Pacific will allow it to become the economic leader in an increasingly strategic geopolitical area. Under the DSR namesake, Chinese companies are financing and investing in the development of Indo-Pacific information and communications technology (ICT), which consists of various forms of physical infrastructure. Beijing has exported 5G technology to the region, and has been involved in the [laying of undersea and fiber optic cables](#), as well as the provision of artificial intelligence and facial recognition technology. The [Maldives-Sri Lanka Cable \(MSC\)](#), built by [HMN Technologies](#) (formerly Huawei Marine Networks) cost \$22 million and [uses Hulhumalé](#) as a landing station. HMN has, since 2020, [completed 16 undersea cable projects](#) across 27 countries in the Indo-Pacific, valued at \$1.6 billion total. As such, the Maldives is a growing principal locale for China to capture the fiber-optic communications market in the IOR China's supremacy in the regional ICT sector speaks

to Beijing's looming presence of overman in the Indo-Pacific.

To that end, the international community has grown weary over China's potential exploitation of the data transmitted across the infrastructure it develops for malicious use. Such a concern has [been previously raised](#) by the United States. Moreover, China's "smart cities" concept, which Beijing has offered to partner countries under the BRI, include the implementation of thousands of CCTV cameras, developed by companies Dahua and Hikvision, both Chinese. According to the [Observer Research Foundation](#), 861 cameras have already been erected in the Maldives. The same ethical cybersecurity and espionage concerns have arisen over China's provision of surveillance cameras. It is alleged that cameras made by Dahua have [previously been used to analyze skin color](#), sparking apprehension over China's capacity for the devices' nefarious use in the Maldives. Both [Dahua](#) and Hikvision products have been deployed in China's Xinjiang region and have been linked to [considerable human rights violations](#).

China's buildup of technological power across the Indo-Pacific region underscores the pace at which Beijing is participating in a [global techno-nationalist race](#) for control over the emerging technology industry. Competing with the United States and hoping to supplant Western influence, China seeks to dominate as much of the worldwide ICT market as possible. Beijing's "[Made in 2025](#)" initiative is emblematic of this desire. China is obsessed with having a hand in every region of the world, attaining dominance over physical ICT infrastructure as well as the development and sale of emerging technologies, which it sees as invaluable to acquire geopolitical influence. To Beijing, there is no better way of doing this than investment in BRI flagship projects, simultaneously forging diplomatic ties with partner governments and surging forward in the global competition. For small countries

dependent on international economic agreements, like the Maldives, there is little reason to turn down China's ambitious projects. The Maldives is just one of many countries China aims to endeavor with. The emerging Indo-Pacific market is the locus of China's BRI interest, which has grown in intensity over recent years and will undoubtedly continue. Chinese technology is a cornerstone of digital authoritarianism and the Maldives has surfaced as a stronghold for Beijing's amplification as the world's leading techno-nationalist power. Malé is ready to engage with China to diversify its economic and political agenda, which in turn exalts Beijing as a hegemonic leader of the IOR.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.