



***US-MALDIVES BILATERAL TIES:
EMBRACING THE US ROLE AS A
CAPACITY BUILDER***

BY CHIQUITA WIDJAJA

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The Maldives—having expelled Indian troops and elected a pro-China president in 2023—is playing an increasingly pivotal role in China’s [String of Pearls](#) in the Indian Ocean. The United States, in upholding a free and open [Indo-Pacific](#) amid geostrategic competition, should prove itself a reliable and supportive partner to the Maldives by helping to meet [Maldivian foreign policy goals](#) in the fields of environmental security and institution-building.

Located at the center of major international shipping routes in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is a strategic state for both the US and China. Threatened by rising sea levels, the Maldives has adopted an ambitious development outlook but relies on assistance from greater powers. While the 2020 [US-Maldives Defense Agreement](#) reflected both countries’ commitment to the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, changes in Maldivian domestic politics, strengthening China-Maldives cooperation, and the deterioration of India-Maldives relations in subsequent years have created grounds for a re-evaluation on the effectiveness of the current US-Maldives ties.

Reflecting upon the recent “[India Out](#)” campaign that led to the withdrawal of Indian troops from

Maldivian soil, it is evident that security-based bilateral connections no longer suffice to maintain close ties with the Maldives. However, failing to keep the Maldives engaged in the Indo-Pacific strategy means jeopardizing access to address security threats endangering vital maritime supply chains in the Indian Ocean. Thus, what is the Maldives looking for? Simply put, environmental protection and technical cooperation to strengthen state institutions, as highlighted in their [third and sixth foreign policy goals](#).

Unfortunately, the current security- and tourism-focused US engagement with the Maldives is less relevant to their needs compared to China’s \$130 million [grant](#) and \$200 million [Friendship Bridge](#). As China increasingly appeals to the Maldives’ developmental goals through infrastructure construction, the US also must play a more proactive role in identifying and addressing the Maldivian priority concerns, especially as a capacity builder.

Environmental technology assistance

With limited land mass, a growing population, and a booming tourism industry, one of the Maldives’ most imminent crises is the Thilafushi “trash island”—an artificial island used mainly as a landfill and built almost entirely on plastic scraps. Due to poor waste management systems, Thilafushi has become a danger to marine life as it contaminates the quality of adjacent water and air and exacerbates climate change. The Maldivian government has made efforts to rehabilitate the island through its [waste-to-energy conversion](#) project, which is largely sponsored by the Asian Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Initially expected to be completed in 2023, it remains under construction today and is predicted to solve only [60%](#) of the Maldives’ waste management issues.

This presents an opportunity for the US to assist the Maldives in achieving a sustainable [closed-loop recycling](#) system in Thilafushi, particularly by transferring [chemical recycling](#) technologies. Using heat and chemical reaction to break used plastic down into virgin-equivalent plastic or fuel, this innovation has been gradually replacing traditional

mechanical recycling methods in the US and gaining traction worldwide but is still foreign to the Maldives.

While US companies continuously develop chemical recycling technologies, they often face two major [challenges](#): an underdeveloped domestic US market for recycled products and limited incentives to invest on recycling innovations within the country. The Maldives, on the other hand, is in dire need of new and more effective recycling technologies as the implications of continued environmental degradation pose an existential threat for the island nation.

Thus, the introduction of chemical recycling methods to Thilafushi by the US is a win-win solution for all parties. Firstly, it would encourage US companies to accelerate research and development on chemical recycling. Secondly, the Maldivian government could fulfil its [third foreign policy goal](#) of creating economic resilience through climate action, as well as acquire advanced recycling technologies. Lastly, the US government would be able to foster a stronger relationship with the Maldives through technology transfer.

Foreign service institution capacity-building

The Maldivian government is also concerned about its lack of high-caliber professional diplomats and experience in the foreign service system, as reflected in its [sixth foreign policy goal](#). The Maldives believes that to achieve its international ambitions, it needs to first develop the capacity of its professional foreign service.

Therefore, the [Foreign Service Institute of Maldives](#) (FOSIM) was established under the 2021 Foreign Policy Act. Mandated to provide all necessary and mandatory training to foreign service officers, FOSIM collaborates with local figures and senior staff members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to exchange knowledge and share experiences. For the US, FOSIM creates a fresh avenue for the government to provide expertise and pursue capacity building with the Maldives.

At the end of 2023, the US appointed [Ambassador Hugo Yon](#) as the first Resident Ambassador of the US to the Maldives. Having been previously

assigned to five other overseas US embassies and consulates and a minister counselor in the US Senior Foreign Service today, the appointment of Ambassador Yon—an experienced and highly regarded diplomat—reflects the US [dedication](#) to establishing stronger relations with the Maldives. However, the current [US mission to the Maldives](#) is only focused on the promotion of higher education opportunities in the US for Maldivians and business exchange. This could and should be expanded. With a seasoned diplomat already stationed in the country, the US has the necessary resources to aid the Maldives in building the capacity of its foreign service institution.

The US government should propose a collaboration between FOSIM and the US Embassy in the Maldives, where the US serves as an expertise and knowledge broker for the Maldivian foreign service officers. Among FOSIM's many programs, the US can especially play an active role in their Distinguished Speaker Series and Briefing Programs for Ambassadors—sharing lessons from experience and discussing best practices.

For the Maldives, this partnership will allow its foreign service officers to learn from more experienced US diplomats with novel perspectives on the challenges and solutions within the field of international relations. On the other hand, this will provide the US with a platform to demonstrate its commitment to the development of human capital in the Maldives and ultimately, build stronger bilateral ties.

All in all, to keep the Maldives engaged in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy, the US should aid the Maldives in achieving their foreign policy goals—especially as they face increasing challenges in environmental security and quality of foreign service. With technological resources and knowledge expertise on hand, the US should expand the scope of its relationship with the Maldives beyond security and assume the role of a capacity builder. Without doing so, the US will miss out on opportunities to create a more resilient relationship with the Maldives and maintain a free and open Indian Ocean.

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