

RAJA MANDALA: BATTLE FOR ISLANDS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

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Simultaneous developments last week in different corners of the Indo-Pacific — from the Maldives to Papua New Guinea — remind us of the renewed geopolitical importance of the island states. Connecting these diverse developments is China's push for greater influence in the Indo-Pacific and the belated resistance from rival powers — including India, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States.

At the dawn of the modern maritime age four centuries ago, control of critically-located islands became an important part of the rivalry between European powers in the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. Islands helped the replenishment of supplies, positioning of troops and ammunition as well as for the host ship to do repair and maintenance. Island dominance was the key to securing the sea lines of communication.

The Anglo-American maritime dominance over the last two centuries helped limit the contestation for the islands. The one brief exception was imperial Japan's challenge in the decades before the Second World War. Today, the rise of China has pitchforked the island states back to the centre stage of major power politics.

No wonder, Prime Minister Narendra Modi found time during the busy election season to travel all the way south to Male, the capital of the Maldives, for a visit that lasted less than four hours. For both Delhi and Male, the PM's visit was about signalling India's enduring importance for the Maldives. Modi's presence at the swearing-in of the new president of the Maldives, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, underlined the renewed warmth in the relations between the two countries.

Under Solih's predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, India's relations with the Maldives rapidly deteriorated even as China's influence began to rise. The contestation between Delhi and Beijing in the Maldives inevitably got intertwined with the democratic struggle of the opposition parties to end Yameen's autocracy. They kept demanding an Indian intervention as Yameen trampled over the parliament and judiciary, but Delhi held back.

The intersection of Sino-Indian rivalry with domestic politics has also come to the fore in neighbouring Sri Lanka. Like much of the international community, India too was surprised late last month, when the Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena dismissed Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe and installed the former president Mahinda Rajapaksa as the head of government.

Even before the rest of the world could absorb the meaning of Sirisena's political coup, the Chinese ambassador in Colombo showed up at Rajapaksa's office to congratulate him and convey the best wishes of President Xi. India, the US and EU, in contrast, emphasised the importance of due constitutional process and letting parliament test which party had the majority.

If China is widely seen as the loser — at least for the moment — from the elections in the Maldives, it was seen as a winner in Rajapaksa's return to power. During his decade-long rule of Sri Lanka (2004-15), Colombo seemed to steadily drift into China's orbit. Symbolising China's new influence in Lanka were the strategic contracts it won to build the Colombo port city and the construction of a new port at Hambantota in the southern part of the island. India, in turn, appeared to lose its historic primacy in the island state.

Looking further east, last week saw the island state of Papua New Guinea host the annual summit of the forum for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. How did the poorest member of the forum venture to host the summit that brings leaders from 20-odd countries from America to China, Malaysia to Japan and Canada to Chile? Well, the Chinese and Australians have lent generous assistance.

As in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, the last few years have seen a spectacular rise in Chinese commercial and political presence in Papua New Guinea. As speculation mounted that China might be in quest of a military base in Papua New Guinea, Australia and the US moved in last week and announced that they will fund the development of the port facilities in the Manus Island to the north-east of the main island. Imperial Japan — Canberra and Washington have not forgotten — had occupied Manus and built a military base there in 1942.

Earlier this year, Canberra nudged Beijing out of a deal to build an under-sea internet cable between Papua, Australia and the Solomon Islands. This week, Australia joined the US, Japan and New Zealand in unveiling a project to provide electricity to 70 per cent of the Papua New Guinea population by 2030.

Like Delhi in the Indian Ocean, Canberra and Wellington had underestimated the scale and speed of China's power projection into their South Pacific neighbourhood. So did the US, which failed to react in time to China's push to gain control of the small rocks and islands of the South China Sea at the beginning of this decade.

The unfolding contestation for influence in the island states of the Indo-Pacific has just begun. It is unlikely to end any time soon — for one setback in the Maldives or Papua does not diminish China's growing weight in the Indo-Pacific or its determination to project power far beyond its shores.

Unlike the European colonial powers, which could easily prevail over natives of the strategic island territories, today's major powers have to deal with the more complex domestic politics of the island nations. The ruling regimes in these islands have agency and the capacity to play one power against the other. That promises to make the battle for the islands a prolonged and exciting political spectacle in the Indo-Pacific.

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