

BOOK REVIEW

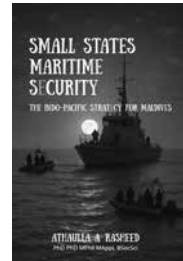
**Small States Maritime Security: The Indo-Pacific
Strategy for Maldives**

by Athaulla A Rasheed

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More often than not, the question of security in international relations has primarily focussed on military power, warfare and great power competition, which has shaped the fundamental perception of the discipline, while alienating the small states' outlook on security. However, as we navigate through an increasingly polycentric global order of the 21st century, the importance assigned to the maritime domain has redefined the role and nature of small states. In this context, the book *Small States Maritime Security: The Indo-Pacific Strategy for Maldives*, authored by Dr Athaulla A. Rasheed, presents a meticulous exploration of the meaning of security for small states. It builds on the complexities of the neoliberal and neorealist schools of

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thought, and takes it ahead by venturing into the Copenhagen school of security. By centring on the non-military dimensions of security, the author has expanded on the traditional state-centric notion.

Dr Rasheed seamlessly integrates insights from his experience as a former Foreign Service officer with his current academic role, while weaving the thread of a constructivist approach throughout the six chapters, followed by a conclusion that is forward looking. He analyses the historical past, post-independence developments, policy statements and papers, and media narratives to define the threat perception for the Maldives, thereby constructing the fear of an existential threat, and shaping its definition of security. By doing this, the book explores the Maldives' agential role in achieving its security objectives within the Indo-Pacific security framework.

In Chapter One the author has drawn on the effect of intersubjectivity in securitising issues for small states, in particular the Maldives. In doing so, the focus has been on the interactions between the big and small states, which are shaped by the interests and desires of the states involved. For instance, the Scandinavian states have shared ideas about the role of gender in UN settings to form international discourses. Similarly, though the Maldives has never faced a marine pollution incident, major regional accidents like the X-Press Pearl, and the MV *Wakashio* incident have led to considering pollution as a security matter, and the security agencies have incorporated marine pollution into the national security policy narratives and operations in the Maldives. Highlighting how security is constructed through interactions of local experience and threat perceptions of regional incidents. To this end, the inherent vulnerability of the Maldives to external threats due to its physical geography has played a quintessential role from the times of the monarchy, to seeking British protection, to the coup in 1988, which resulted in the launch of 'Operation Cactus' by India. Stretching over 820 km in length, 99 per cent of the national territory of the Maldives comprises the ocean, with less than 2 per cent comprising land.

By shifting the spotlight to various non-military dimensions of security, Chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five talk in detail about challenges like marine pollution, accidents, climate change, Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) fishing, transnational crimes, and

how each one of them shapes the perception of maritime security for the Maldives. Though there has been extensive discussion on each of the challenges, their impact on humans and their everyday lives is largely missing. This would have further enhanced the gravity of the situation and helped shape a narrative which is required to understand small states' security. While each of the challenges is discussed in separate chapters, the author has carefully drawn a seamless web where each vulnerability is interlinked and interconnected to the others, and has shaped the Maldives' strategies for national development and foreign aid cooperation. As the challenges are transnational in nature, they are addressed at both the regional and national levels. Of all the initiatives that have found mention in the book, the repeated occurrence of Exercise DOSTI, a biennial trilateral coast guard exercise among India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, is a testimony to India's role as a preferred security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and the success it has brought to the regional partners and friends.

Being just 1.5 m above sea level, climate change can literally cause the 'death of a nation' as mentioned by Dr Rasheed. It has been specially addressed in the concerned chapter, both due to the special role played by the Maldives in shaping the narratives on climate change globally, and also because it is intricately linked to the involvement of external actors in the country. As the author also mentions, the Maldives was one of the first countries—Malta was the other—to raise the issue of the unique vulnerability of small states to climate change, and to influence the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the subsequent debates and policy discourses on the life-threatening effects of climate change (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Rasheed, 2021) (p. 45).

The domestic policy narratives on the dangers of sea level rise have continuously influenced the Maldives' foreign policy to incorporate climate and adaptation efforts into developmental projects. Climate change has been a threat multiplier as it exacerbates other challenges, especially for countries that have disproportionately large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and a weak land and resource base to address socio-economic challenges. For example, bad weather can divert the movement of IUU fishers

from the regular surveillance maps of security providers, and can demand that foreign IUU fishers adopt weather-resilient and bigger fleets capable of reaching new zones.

While the book deals with defining the security for small states, by focussing on non-traditional challenges, Dr Rasheed has not completely drifted away from real geopolitics and geoeconomics by tacitly addressing the issues of brewing competition between India and China in the Maldives. In doing so, he has attempted to strike a balance between the security role of New Delhi and the developmental role of Beijing. For example, the China-Maldives friendship bridge has not only reduced the travel time between the islands, but also reduced accidents due to fewer ferries. The Hulhumale Island development project by China is the largest land reclamation project, supporting government, commercial, and private infrastructure and investments. The author also mentions India's sensitivities by acknowledging China's engagements that can undermine the Indo-Pacific rules-based order, and their development projects, especially involving maritime cooperation and port developments that could potentially allow China's non-civilian presence in the Maldives and threaten regional security. To this end, he suggests establishing military cooperation with India as it makes sense for the Indo-Pacific partners, especially in ensuring that piracy, drug crime and terrorist threats are handled by a regional rules-based security architecture. Here, the author underlines the fact that while doing so, the Maldives must not make itself a security question for the regional actors.

Concurrently, the author has also taken into account the recent developments in Maldivian politics, especially the political environment post October 2023. Comments such as the Maldives would not depend solely on India's defence aid and cooperation mirror the ground situation in the Maldives. In 2024, the Maldives signed a defence agreement with China for free non-lethal training and equipment, which remains shrouded in secrecy. Further, Male has not shied from diversifying its defence engagements with Turkiye, from which it is seeking the Bayraktar TB2 tactical drones, and would soon be acquiring (according to the author) Dogan class ships to support the monitoring, surveillance, and search

and rescue capabilities of the coast guard. On the one hand, where smaller countries like the Maldives are attempting to diversify their defence imports, on the other, they also want to avoid being a security question for the bigger countries involved, and uphold autonomy. This is captured well in the penultimate chapter, where the author seems to be walking a tightrope between development and defence cooperation.

Maldives must also ensure that while development cooperation and defence cooperation have worked hand-in-hand within the foreign aid agreements, security and defence engagements are confined to regional security providers, namely India and its Indo-Pacific partners—cooperating with extra-regional actors, like China, for defence projects can create unnecessary militarisation of the local environment by an external power unfavourable to the Indo-Pacific actors, potentially making the home waters and land a hostile environment to the regional security actors. (p. 129)

Overall, Dr Athaulla A Rasheed's book is a fantastic read and will be of immense and abiding interest to both scholars and practitioners of international relations who aim to understand the security of small states in the changing global order. They should no longer be seen as pawns of the great powers, but instead as residents of the global order.