

Comment by Michael C H Jones
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The Maldives are critical for Australia's security in the Indian Ocean and for the nation's sea routes to Europe via the Suez canal in Egypt. The island chain of over a thousand coral islands is over-whelmingly critical to Indian aspirations for predominance in its maritime border regions. Less so for Chinese, ASEAN, Iranian and South African national interests.

World War 1 in 1914 proved that off-center hot-spots can ignite global conflict. Whilst Israel and North Korea may be the current flash-points of Asia, the post Ukraine era brings multipolar rivalries to a new "boiling point" so far in the 21st century. Russia is exercising its military muscle in all regions and planning within a decade a Rapid Response capability of 7 hours anywhere; and no doubt China will not be far behind. The US will remain more than militarily paramount for decades to come but will be challengeable in select areas around the national borders of other Great Powers.

Hence the question of if, when, what and how the US exercises it's diplomatic and military powers. When does a President step in to calm the waters, or even declare war?

An example I have posed in recent internal Chamber emails is the Maldives. Think of a date up to ten years on, say 2022 and an Indian Ocean Economic Development Conference under the auspices of any global organisation, which features Russian President Putin, yes still there, as a key speaker. Obviously the Russian navy must be in attendance as a protection against terrorists, which causes India anxiety and brings their naval units in close proximity. Other parties with regional national interests activate their naval forces, even the EU, with the UK, French and new German units operating out of "friendly" facilities in Saudi Arabia and Kenya. Australia responds to a formal request to provide Special Forces for on the ground security in Male'. The South African President convenes the African Union and calls for UN mediation.

How does the US react?

Part of the answer lies with the internal dynamics of the US Congress - would the House vote overwhelmingly for war as just days ago with the Ukraine? If the question was the territorial preservation of Israel then the President most likely would declare war. Maldives not so. Then what? The existing system of alliances might provide an answer. Submarine facilities for China, say in Sri Lanka and Pakistan? Iranian "hegemony" throughout West Asia re Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and even groups in Northeast Africa? Indonesian/Malaysian sympathises with Saudi Arabia re the Sunni sect of Islam? It's the recipe for at least low-intensity confrontations, especially if there is an attempted assassination.

So what transpires in the Maldives today has ramifications for future Indian Ocean rivalries. Particularly if IS gets a toe-hold.