

Bridging a liquidity surplus: infrastructure development and the case of the China-Maldives (everlasting) Friendship Bridge

Connection point A, Malé: The most densely populated and congested city per square-kilometre in the world (UNDP 20215). A city that has rapidly swollen to the boundaries of the island itself. With the chaotic expansion of construction stunted at the shore-line, buildings lurch upward toward the sky. A demand-heavy property market struggles to house migrant populations from the outlying islands and around the world.

Connection point B, Hulhumalé: An island built anew by dumping 6 million metric tons of sand from the bottom of the ocean on to a reef flat. A blank canvas for Singaporean architects to imagine, urban planners to design, and emerging investment facilities to fund. A city for the future where houses yet to be constructed have already been sold. Marketed to Maldivians as 'Youth City' and to capital investors as 'City of Hope'.

Linking these two disparate islands will be the Malé-Hulhumalé Friendship Bridge. Through an analysis of a bridge's respective connection points and the anxieties around the bridge's construction, the paper unpacks the cultural, economic, and political logic that strives for a contiguous landmass. Whilst the bridge has long been part of a public, infrastructural, and political imaginary in the Maldives, it has begun to be realised at pace through a project loan from the Exim Bank of China and the endless toil of the Chinese subsidiary, China Communications Construction Company Ltd. The paper explores how the bridge is part of the global political economy of liquidity and infrastructure financing; a node in a much broader swathe of Chinese investment into the Asian 'infrascape'. It examines the bridge as an ambitious new structural feature of archipelagic-connectivity that, in its anticipation, impacts on how people imagine ways of working, living, commuting, and being connected in the Maldives.

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