

A fresh start

The visit by Mohamed Asim, foreign minister and special envoy of Maldivian president Abdulla Yameen, to Delhi, may have cleared some of the bitterness between the two countries that followed from Yameen's dash to China last December to sign the Free Trade Agreement. Delhi saw this as a betrayal of the Maldives' publicly stated "India First" policy. It is not incidental that even before the ink on the Maldives-China FTA was dry, the allegedly pro-Yameen 'Vaguthu' newspaper in the Maldives described India as its "biggest enemy" and suggested that Male should find a new best friend in China.

The photograph of [Narendra Modi](#) and Asim shaking hands in Delhi framed a few home truths. First, India cannot take its predominant power in South Asia for granted. Whether it is Nepal, where the people recently elected the pro-Chinese and moderate Communist, K.P. Oli, to power, or the Maldives, Delhi's mandarins must abandon their perceived arrogance towards its smaller neighbours.

Second, India needs to separate ground reality from its desires — whatever its discomfort with Yameen, it has to learn to deal with him. Elections are due in the Maldives later this year and Delhi must realistically assess the pros and cons, including its policy towards exiled former president Mohamed Nasheed, before taking sides. And third, China is here to stay in the Maldives, as well as across the rest of South Asia.

In fact, the China-Maldives pact is a perfect example. Not only will it pave the way for a tighter embrace between Beijing and this tiny Indian Ocean nation, it will also open the Maldives to Chinese goods and tourists in unprecedented numbers. Yameen had already promised Xi Jinping, when he visited Male in 2015 — just like Oli had done, when he visited Beijing as PM in 2016 — that their countries would be an integral link in China's Belt and Road Initiative, through which Xi seeks to globally project the power of the Middle Kingdom.

To be sure, the Maldives problem predates Modi. From the time that the UPA 2 refused to support Nasheed in the 2013 elections, although he had convincingly won the first round, it's been steadily downhill. Still, Mohamed Asim's visit is acknowledgement that both sides have no alternative but to make amends. Maldives has to learn to deal with India's proximity, and vice-versa.

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