

CHINA'S XI JINPING SAYS SUPPORTS MALDIVES IN PROTECTING 'SOVEREIGNTY': STATE MEDIA

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Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) told Maldivian counterpart [Mohamed Muizzu](#) that he supported the [strategically located](#) archipelago in protecting its " [sovereignty](#)", state media reported, after the two countries signed a number of infrastructure and other agreements.

Muizzu was elected in September as a proxy for a pro-China predecessor jailed on corruption charges, vowing to cultivate "strong ties" with Beijing.

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This week he embarked on his trip to [China](#), his first state visit since taking office, and met with Xi on Wednesday, Beijing's state media reported.

"Under the new circumstances, China-Maldives relations face a historic opportunity to build on past achievements and forge ahead," Xi told Muizzu, according to its state-run Xinhua news agency.

Xi "stressed that China respects and supports the [Maldives](#) in exploring a development path suited to its national conditions", it added, and "supports the Maldives firmly in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national dignity".

Muizzu, in response, thanked Xi for "China's significant role in the Maldives' economic success" and Beijing's role in "infrastructure development of the Maldives", according to a readout from his office.

Muizzu's party was an eager recipient of financial largesse from China's Belt and Road infrastructure programme -- a central pillar of Xi's bid to expand China's clout overseas.

His mentor, former president Abdulla Yameen, borrowed heavily from China for construction projects and spurned India.

The two countries on Wednesday signed several agreements, including on climate, agriculture, and infrastructure, Muizzu's office said.

Primarily known as one of the most expensive holiday destinations in South Asia, with pristine white beaches and secluded resorts, the Maldives has also become a geopolitical hotspot.

Global east-west shipping lanes pass the nation's chain of 1,192 tiny coral islands, stretching around 800 kilometres (500 miles) across the equator.

Muizzu was elected promising to remove a unit of Indian security personnel, deployed to operate three aircraft gifted to the Maldives to patrol its vast maritime territory.

Last month he said he had secured their withdrawal, but did not give any timeframe.

He has denied seeking to redraw the regional balance by bringing in Chinese forces instead.

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