

EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS: DON'T OVERREACT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Since the election of Mohamed Muizzu as president, Maldives has undoubtedly been moving away from India and closer to China. The China-Maldives joint statement at the end of Muizzu's visit bears testimony to their bonhomie. The trip saw barely veiled references to India's "bullying". Then on Sunday, Ahmed Nazim, policy director at the Maldives President's office reportedly said that the "Maldivian delegation" at the first India-Maldives High-Level Core Group meeting "proposed the removal of Indian troops by March 15".

The deadline did not find a mention in the official statements by the foreign offices of the two countries. The statement, coming as it does on the heels of the controversy over the juvenile remarks by Maldivian ministers about Prime Minister Modi's Lakshadweep visit, deserves attention. But an outsize reaction must be avoided.

Muizzu's turn to Beijing may seem like a decisive shift but it is of a piece with the political see-saw in Male, which has had an unfortunate effect on the country's external orientation. Muizzu's predecessor, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, was seen as being pro-India and the current president ran on an "India out" campaign.

The withdrawal of Indian troops from the country was a poll promise, more political than strategic — India reportedly has less than 90 soldiers in Maldives. Solih's predecessor Abdulla Yameen tilted towards Beijing. The fact that India plays a significant role in Maldivian politics should not be surprising.

Militarily, economically and strategically, India looms large over its neighbours. Some aspects of India's internal politics — expansionist rhetoric, conflating religion and illegal migration during polls — too can make many in the neighbourhood uncomfortable and be used to whip up sentiments by those seeking power. Social media jingoism and calls for boycotting a smaller neighbour do not help matters.

How should [Delhi](#) react to the Muizzu government's snubs? The answer is clear and was framed by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Saturday: "... politics is politics," he said and added that "it can't be guaranteed that every country will support or agree with India every time." Smaller countries like Maldives will do their best to leverage the rivalries among greater powers — in this case, India and China. What makes the current "India Out" push disturbing is the all-or-nothing approach. There seems to be little recognition of the realities of geography or convergent interests. The fact remains that Maldives is a mere 700 km from the Indian coast and over 6,000 km from China. From the tsunami in 2004 to the drinking water crisis a decade later, India was the first to rush to the Maldivians' aid. At the same time, China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean make smaller littoral states perfect targets for Beijing's diplomatic outreach. Delhi must continue to engage with Male, as well as the people of Maldives. As the regional power, it need not be thin-skinned.

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