

CHOPPY WATERS: ON INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

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Within weeks of the [India-Maldives showdown](#) over derogatory [remarks by Maldivian Ministers](#) and the [call for Indian tourists to boycott the archipelago](#), as well as the tussle over Indian troops stationed in Maldives, Delhi and Male are dealing with another controversy. This time it is over the Chinese “research” ship Xiang Yang Hong 03, that is expected to dock in Male in February. India has made its concerns over Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean clear. After [objecting to visits by Chinese “research” vessels to Sri Lanka](#), New Delhi managed to ensure that Colombo banned, from 2024, all foreign research ships, that are believed to collect data for military and civilian purposes, from docking there. For New Delhi, the welcome mat for Chinese ships, at a time the new government of President Muizzu has [scrapped the India-Maldives hydrography agreement](#), has played out as a rebuff. Male also welcomed a visit by the commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, who presented equipment. That the developments follow other setbacks, beginning with Mr. Muizzu’s electoral win last year after he ran with an “India Out” campaign slogan, his [government’s plans to push out Indian personnel](#) and his decision to prioritise visits to Türkiye, the UAE and China have made it more worrying.

It is significant that despite Male’s pushback and hyper nationalist calls within India, New Delhi has not stopped engaging the Muizzu government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Mr. Muizzu in December and set up a high-level core group for bilateral negotiations on tricky issues. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also met with his Maldivian counterpart last week. It is hoped that both sides realise that their tensions are merely symptoms of problems that could get larger: one, a regional power that aspires to be a global power, and the other, an archipelago dependent for its economic and regional security needs on external forces. While sovereignty is paramount for any country, it is important that the two sides see the benefit of a détente over confrontation. For India, whose neighbourhood first policy focuses on helping according to its neighbour’s priorities, it is ungainly to be seen as foisting its military, that has carried out humanitarian operations, on the Maldives. For the Muizzu government, that just lost a significant election for Male mayor, the impact of the animus with India on upcoming Majlis (parliamentary) elections should also be a worry. In that sense, the Maldives decision to invite the Xiang Yang Hong 03, but not to allow it more than a routine port call is hopefully a sign that quiet diplomacy is working. A rational approach is more likely to shore troubled bilateral ties out of the choppy waters now.

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