

# NEIGHBOURS FIRST

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s first official visit abroad in his second term to the Maldives and Sri Lanka reiterated that the "neighbourhood first" policy remains the credo of the new government. It reaffirmed India's longstanding ties with these two countries. It signalled Delhi's assertion in the Indian Ocean region, where Chinese power and influence compete with its own.

India has been helped in this by the major political changes in both countries where governments seen as "pro-China" were swept out in democratic elections and replaced with those that seem more India friendly, or at least more "balanced" in their foreign policies, Sri Lanka in 2015 and the Maldives as recently as last November.

During the Modi visit, apart from signing a slew of agreements, India and Maldives agreed to strengthen their maritime security co-operation to maintain peace and stability in the Indian Ocean, and not allow their respective territories to be used for activity inimical to the other, oblique but obvious boilerplate references to Chinese interests in the Maldives.

In both Male and Colombo, Prime Minister Modi made common cause on the issue of fighting terrorism. While Maldives has seen a high number of young people — in proportion to its population — leave the country to join the ISIS, Sri Lanka is still reeling from the April 21 bombings by a group of highly radicalised Sri Lankan Muslims, later claimed by ISIS as its own. During Modi's visit to Male, India and the Maldives agreed to set up a Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and Deradicalisation.

In Colombo, as the first foreign leader to visit the island after the bombings, Prime Minister Modi conveyed that India stood in solidarity with Sri Lankans during this difficult period. In another era, in view of the open hostility from Sinhala Buddhist hardliners toward the island's Muslim community that is threatening the peace, India might have underlined the importance of communal harmony in the island as a vital element in checking violent radicalisation in the region.

While Delhi has managed to regain its footing in both capitals, in order for this to be lasting and able to withstand political changes, India will need to be win influence through the hard work of trust building and co-operation at many levels — political, official and people to people. It can no longer be demanded as an entitlement by sheer virtue of being their biggest and most powerful neighbour. Minister for External Affairs S Jaishankar correctly said last week that India's neighbourhood policy had to be "more generous" and freed from bureaucratic reciprocity. With a fresh and more powerful mandate, the Modi government is well placed to do this.

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