

## TO MALE, WITH CARE

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

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Ever since the general elections in the Maldives last September, Delhi's political position has begun to rapidly improve in the island republic. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) was an honoured guest at the swearing-in of the new prime minister, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, in November. Now, the external affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj, has returned from what appears to be a productive visit to Male. On his part, the foreign minister of Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, reiterated the new government's commitment to the "India First" policy. He also promised that Male "would remain sensitive towards India's security and strategic concerns".

Shahid and Swaraj also agreed that India and the Maldives would step up coordination to enhance regional maritime security. The context of these affirmations is the comprehensive tilt towards China by Solih's predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, during 2013-18. As China embraced Yameen, there was speculation that the Maldives was slipping into Beijing's strategic orbit.

As Solih renews Male's traditional political warmth to Delhi, India can't afford to return to its complacent ways. For one, Delhi should be acutely aware that China is here to stay in the South Asian waters. China's impressive economic muscle, ability to deliver on massive infrastructure projects on short order, and a clear determination to raise its naval profile in the Indian Ocean, make Beijing a formidable rival in the Maldives. The present government in Colombo came to power in early 2015 on a platform critical of Mahinda Rajapaksa's sweetheart infrastructure deals with China. It did not take long for Colombo to extend some of the very same projects on more favourable terms to China.

If Beijing could leverage its debt diplomacy and political pressure to make the new rulers in Colombo fall in line, it could do the same in Male. Swaraj's visit did not see the announcement of any major Indian projects. Nor is it clear if India's limited budgetary support would be enough to overcome Male's current challenges. Delhi must never forget to see Male's proclamations on "putting India first" in the domestic context of the Maldives. The political elite of tiny Maldives is fractious and the structures regulating competition are fragile. All of the factions are acutely aware of the geopolitical value of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. In their competition for wealth and power, different factions are ready to mobilise support from the major powers and play one against the other. It is up to the next government in Delhi to devise a long term strategy that builds on India's geographic proximity to the Maldives, the imperatives of economic integration, the logic of mutually beneficial security cooperation and the commitment to sustained tending of bilateral relations.

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