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## In Focus

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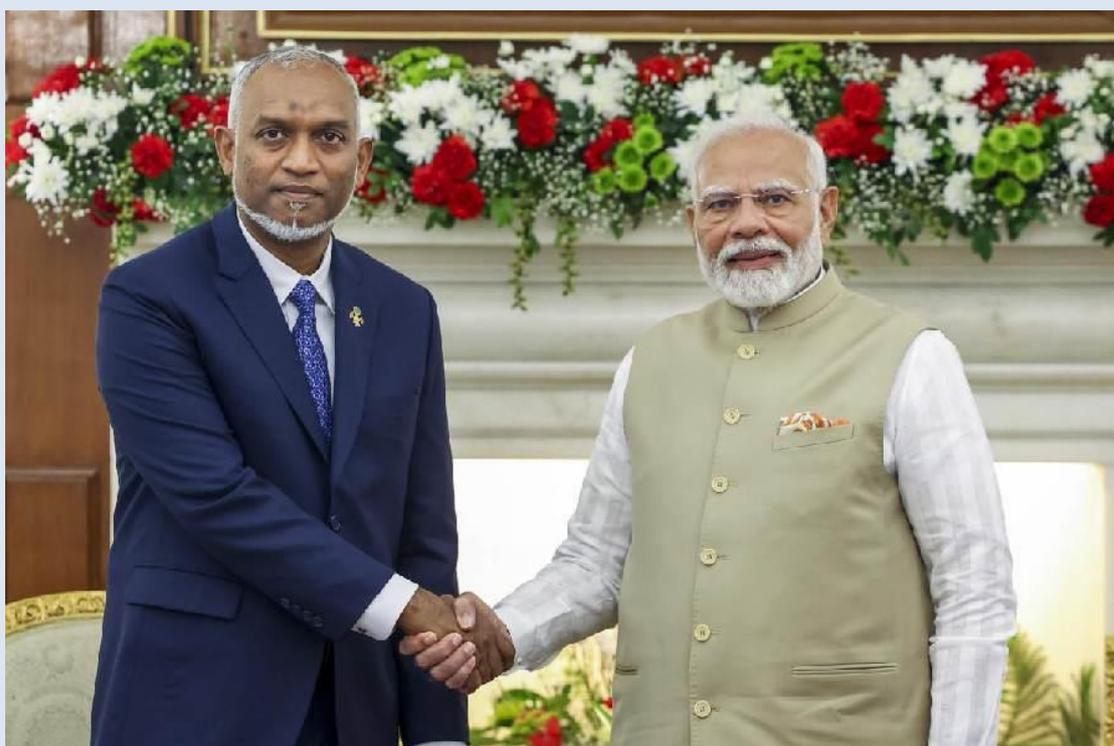
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### Reflections on Muizzu's First State Visit to India

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After the election of Maldives' President, Dr Mohamed Muizzu, in October 2023, analysts and security experts from the region and beyond minimised New Delhi-Malé ties to a ballot. The sceptics were partially true as the incumbent President rode on the 'India Out' campaign during the elections in 2023. However, the first state visit of Muizzu to India after the initial hiccups suggests that it is not easy to classify Maldives' foreign policy either in favour of or against India. Neither would it be a cakewalk for the Maldives to put all its eggs in one basket by choosing India or China. However, after the rocky beginning under the Muizzu administration, the relationship seems to be settling down, and a shift has been noticed from limited engagement to firm commitment. Development, diversification, and decentralisation have emerged as the guiding star of the India-Maldives ties. It remains to be seen how the goodwill generated during the visit, with the MoUs signed, agreements undertaken, and the vision document jointly comprehended, will traverse through the next four years of the Muizzu administration and take the relationship forward amid the drifting regional and global politics.

Although President Muizzu was invited in June 2024 for the swearing-in ceremony of PM Modi, his first state visit from October 06 to 10, 2024, happened exactly a year after he was elected as the eighth President of the Maldives. A closer look at the ties over the past year reveals several moments of uncertainty and unpredictability, marking a shift away from some of the 'obvious' aspects of the relationship.<sup>1</sup> Some of such moments include the demand for the return of Indian soldiers operating Indian aviation platforms involved in humanitarian assistance and breaking the norm of making India the first foreign visit.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the signing of a defence agreement with China that continues to remain shrouded in secrecy while allowing its so-called research vessels to undertake port visits to Maldives, despite being known for engaging in grey zone activities in the Indian Ocean. However, India's response to such practices by the Maldives remained non-reciprocal, based on strategic patience, which has compounded positively for the India-Maldives partnership. Fresh air is now ventilating the partnership as reflected in the document 'India and Maldives: A Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security' jointly released and agreed upon by PM Modi of India and President Muizzu of Maldives.<sup>3</sup>

The interdependency between development, diversification, and decentralisation of the projects and the areas of cooperation forms the core of the document and is likely to shape the relationship in the years to come. The delivery of projects that have an intergenerational impact (i.e., those that improve the quality of life for generations of Maldives) and stand the test of time, like the big-ticket infrastructure projects as well as small community development projects, is highlighted throughout. The former will enhance and improve inter-island connectivity and Maldives' connectivity with the outside world, while the latter focuses on uplifting and improving the quality of life for ordinary Maldivians through housing facilities, Jan Aushadhi Kendras, sewerage and water supply facilities across 28 islands (announced during Dr Jaishankar's visit), among other initiatives. Simultaneously, diversification to incorporate new and emerging areas like women-led development, renewable energy, building on the benefits of financial technology, and leveraging the potential digital public infrastructure in public deliveries has a decentralised impact to ensure holistic development of Maldives that is not limited to the capital city, Male, but also includes other islands.<sup>4</sup>

An important dimension of the visit was, of course, the economic assistance that Muizzu was looking for from New Delhi, especially after extremely low forex reserves, risks of Islamic debt default, and the dwindling number of Indian tourists. Tourism contributes 22.5 per cent to the GDP and remains a quintessential source of income for Maldivians. According to the Ministry of Tourism, Republic of

Maldives, the total number of Indian tourist arrivals from January to August in 2023 was 1,35,495, while in 2024, it was 81,505.<sup>5</sup> To this end, New Delhi's currency swap agreement with the Maldives and the buying of the latter's treasury bills stand out.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Muizzu also visited the financial capital of India, Mumbai, and the IT hub, Bengaluru, to explore investment opportunities in various sectors like real estate, business, and information technology. Further, he also invited filmmakers and production houses to shoot films and television serials in the Maldives.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all the symbolism and substance of the visit, as the Indian Ocean becomes increasingly dynamic and re-emerges on the strategic map of both distant and proximate powers, the need for diversification of partnerships will be sought after by both small and big countries. Therefore, any sweet patch in the bilateral relationship must not be seen as a lasting insurance mechanism for the partnership. The changing geopolitical situation requires continuous engagement that is flexible and well-balanced, leading to win-win situations rather than zero-sum games.

## NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Radhey Tambi, "Entailment of Maldives' Actions Against India", Centre for Air Power Studies, January 19, 2024, <https://capsindia.org/entailment-of-maldives-actions-against-india/>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), "India and Maldives: A Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership", October 07, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38384/India+and+Maldives+A+Vision+for+Comprehensive+Economic+and+Maritime+Security+Partnership#:~:text=The%20two%20countries%20agreed%20that,Defence%20Force%20\(MNDF\)%20'Ekatha](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/38384/India+and+Maldives+A+Vision+for+Comprehensive+Economic+and+Maritime+Security+Partnership#:~:text=The%20two%20countries%20agreed%20that,Defence%20Force%20(MNDF)%20'Ekatha). Accessed on October 10, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Tourism (Republic of Maldives), "Tourism Statistics", <https://www.tourism.gov.mv/en/statistics/publications>. Accessed on October 15, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), "English Translation of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's Press Statement at the Joint Press Conference with the President of Maldives (October 7, 2024)", October 07, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38383/English+Translation+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modis+Press+Statement+at+the+Joint+Press+Conference+with+the+President+of+Maldives+October+7+2024>. Accessed on October 08, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Yogesh Naik, "Maldives president Muizzu invites Bollywood to shoot in his country", *Hindustan Times*, October 09, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/maldives-president-muizzu-invites-bollywood-to-shoot-in-his-country-101728414501262.html>. Accessed on October 11, 2024.