

Modi's Forthcoming Visit to Maldives and Sri Lanka

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Summary

Like in his first term (2014-2019), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is making his first foreign visit to a neighbouring South Asian country in his second term. He will be in Maldives on 8-9 June 2019 and stops over in Colombo while returning to India. This visit will strengthen India's relationships with the two strategically located island countries.

Embracing his 'Neighbourhood -First policy', in letters and spirit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has chosen Maldives as his first foreign destination in his second consecutive term. He will be in Maldives on 8-9 June 2019. As tweeted by Foreign Minister of Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, "(The) Maldives Parliament has unanimously passed a resolution to invite PM Narendra Modi to address a sitting of the house during his upcoming visit to the [Maldives](#)." While returning to India from the visit, he will stop over in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo on 9 June.

The forthcoming visit, as the Indian Ministry of External Affairs press release says, "will provide an important occasion to review the recent developments in bilateral relations and exchange views on issues of mutual interest with the objective of further strengthening the special relationship between the two [countries](#)". It also adds that Modi's visit to Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrate the priority India attaches to its "Neighbourhood- First" policy and the SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) [doctrine](#).

Maldivian leaders were among the first to congratulate Modi for his thumping win in the 2019 parliamentary elections. In fact former President and Speaker Mohammad Nasheed congratulated Modi on 19 May 2019 itself after the exit polls showed that he is returning to power. In response to the post-result congratulations by the Maldivian President, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Modi tweeted that "I look forward to working closely with you to further strengthen our multifaceted [partnership](#)." He also received a call from former President and Speaker of the Maldivian parliament, Mohamed Nasheed on May 26. Nasheed stressed the importance of close cooperation to fight forces of extremism and radicalisation in the region, to which Modi reiterated the commitment to continue fostering a strong, mutually beneficial all-round [partnership](#).

In the last few years, in Maldives, internal power conflicts between the government and the opposition parties, and large-scale economic engagement of China had affected its relationship with India. During Abdulla Yameen's tenure (2013-2018) as the President of the country, a large number of political opponents faced imprisonment and emergency was introduced to punish the protestors and impose the President's power on people. On the foreign and economic policies front, Maldives mainly established good relationships with China and Saudi Arabia, and attempted to move away from India. Preferential treatment to

China led to large-scale Chinese investments in Maldives. As a result, the country got into a debt trap, estimated to be around US\$1.5 billion (S\$1.9 billion), with [China](#).

The political clashes ended in 2018 when Yameen lost the presidential elections to Solih. After his win, Solih promised to revisit the country's economic deals with China. It seems his assumption of power and statements were not liked by China. A week after Solih took over, as claimed by Mohamed Nasheed, the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, handed the government an invoice of [US\\$3.2 billion](#) (S\$3.6 billion). This is being denied by China which, however, maintained that the amount is nearer to [US\\$1.5 billion \(S\\$ 1.9 billion\)](#).

Unlike China, India welcomed Solih with open arms. Modi attended his swearing-in ceremony in Male. In December 2018, Solih chose India as his first foreign destination. During the visit, India announced a US\$1.4 billion (S\$ 1.8 billion) loan to the [Maldives](#). India and Maldives signed- an agreement on the facilitation of visa arrangements, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cultural cooperation, a MoU to establish mutual cooperation to improve the ecosystem for agribusiness, and a Joint Declaration of Intent on Cooperation in the field of information & communications technology and electronics. Solih also met members of the Indian business community and invited them to invest in the Maldives. At that time, Solih said that the two sides agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance.

In March 2019, the then-External Affairs Minister of India, Sushma Swaraj, travelled to Maldives for a two-day visit. That visit was to strengthen the "close and friendly" relations between India and [Maldives](#). During her visit, she met Solih, Abdulla Shahid and Home Minister Sheikh Imran Abdulla. Swaraj held delegation-level talks with Defence Minister Mariya Ahmed Didi, Finance Minister Ibrahim Ameer, National Planning and Infrastructure Minister Mohamed Aslam, Transport and Civil Aviation Minister Aishath Nahula and Economic Development Minister Fayyaz Ismail. At that time the two countries signed three agreements: visa facilitation for diplomatic and official passport holders, development cooperation and on renewable [energy](#).

India's relationship with Sri Lanka has relatively improved since President Maithripala Sirisena came into power in 2015 in Colombo, reversing the seeming decline during Mahinda Rajapaksa's second tenure (2010-2015). Strategically, like in the Maldives, there are growing foot prints of China in this island country, which competes directly with India's influence there. In December 2017, Sri Lanka formally handed over the Hambantota port on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings [Company](#). In 2019, Sri Lanka signed a deal with India and Japan to develop a deep-sea container terminal in the [country](#). Earlier, India also agreed to develop the [Trincomalee port](#).

Another area that has seen the relationship between India and Sri Lanka deepen is in the counter-terrorism intelligence sharing as Sri Lanka has witnessed a spread of radicalisation among a section of its Muslim population, leading to the serial bomb blasts in the country on 21 April 2019. Soon after the attack, India sent an investigation team to help Sri Lanka nab the perpetrators of the blast.

Modi's forthcoming visit will help India to establish closer relationships with the two Island countries. It will also reinvigorate India's maritime policy. However, this visit will be closely watched and scanned by China which has multiple stakes in the two South Asian countries.

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