

Maldivian Foreign Minister's India Trip Highlights Region's Geopolitical Reality

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Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer visited India from 8-10 May during which he met Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and had an in-depth discussion on bilateral relations and regional developments.

Jaishankar asserted during Zameer's visit, "As close and proximate neighbours, the development of our ties is obviously based on mutual interests and reciprocal sensitivity. As far as India is concerned, these are articulated in terms of our 'Neighbourhood First' policy and 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision."

There has been quite a prominent tilt in Maldivian foreign policy in favour of China which is becoming a major challenge for India in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. The successful 'India Out' campaign by President Muizzu and his consistent anti-India rhetoric further resulted in the deterioration of this relationship. His political party, the People's National Congress (PNC), won a majority in the parliamentary elections of April 2024. Muizzu has also called China "one of the closest allies and developmental partners of the Maldives".

It was also during Zameer's visit that New Delhi met its deadline to withdraw all of its military personnel from the Maldives, which was a campaign promise made by Muizzu.

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Moosa's Conciliatory Tone

After his election victory, Muizzu visited Beijing but skipped a visit to New Delhi. Male and Beijing's relationship was elevated to a Strategic Cooperative Partnership during his January visit. To complement this, China has also penned a defence pact with Male. On Muizzu having already visited China and Turkey, and not India, Zameer, while in India, said, "The president visited Turkey as well as China. I think that is mainly for convenience because obviously, we did discuss with Delhi about a visit. But for the convenience of both sides, we thought it might be okay for us to delay it a little bit."

However, during the visit, the foreign minister did attempt to underplay the Chinese shadow over the India-Maldives relationship. After all, Male has benefited from engaging with the Indian economy as well as the loans and debts extended by New Delhi. Moosa also acknowledged that the anti-India rhetoric was unnecessary and every possible step would be taken to prevent the same from being repeated.

He further claimed that the Maldives has not allowed its waters for any spying or research. This is in the context of Chinese spy ships docking at Maldivian shores. The foreign minister stated, “We, as a peaceful country, welcome those vessels which come for peaceful purposes. We have not permitted the Chinese vessel for research in the Maldivian waters”. However, the spy vessel has continued to be a pertinent issue for New Delhi as it lets China keep an eye on Indian naval capabilities and movements. In addition, the Maldives has leased a tiny island, Feydhoo Finolhu, for four billion dollars to China in 2016 for 50 years.

Since the Maldives joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested around 1.37 billion dollars in the former, upgraded the Velana International Airport in Male, and built the cross-sea China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. However, one of the major problem areas for the Maldives is its debt to China. About 20 percent of its public debt is owed to the latter, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has identified the Maldivian debt distress as “high”. If the debt crisis continues, then China's presence will only expand.

Tourism has also become a focal point. Since Muizzu’s election win, there has been a 42 percent drop in Indian tourists to the Maldives during the first four months of 2024. It is no surprise that Male has been keen on wooing Indian tourists back. The economy is heavily dependent on tourism and in this aspect, India is quite crucial for the Maldives. The Maldivian Minister of Tourism Ibrahim Faisal even made a statement recently directed at Indian tourists, urging them to visit the country. He said, “Please be a part of the Maldives’ tourism. Our economy depends on tourism.”

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Zameer's Trip Underscores the Geopolitical Reality of the Region

The overall situation for India with respect to the Maldives is quite grim as of today. The inroads that China has made and the commitment of the current Maldivian regime towards it are not good signs. The Maldives is a small island nation but very crucial for India's security and access to the Indian Ocean Region.

Dictating the foreign policy choices of other sovereign countries, however, has never been an Indian strategy. The Maldives is free to choose its friends but given the history of how friendship with China pans out for smaller nations in the region, like Sri Lanka, Male should revisit the situation. India has shown its respect for the Maldives by withdrawing its military personnel and continuing with its aid (albeit with a 22 percent reduction for 2024-2025).

Nevertheless, the visit of the Maldivian foreign minister underscores the geopolitical reality of the region. One cannot deny that diplomatic developments between China and the Maldives are forcing New Delhi to play catch up. India cannot continue reacting to Chinese actions. To safeguard its neighbourhood, there is an immediate need to be proactive.

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