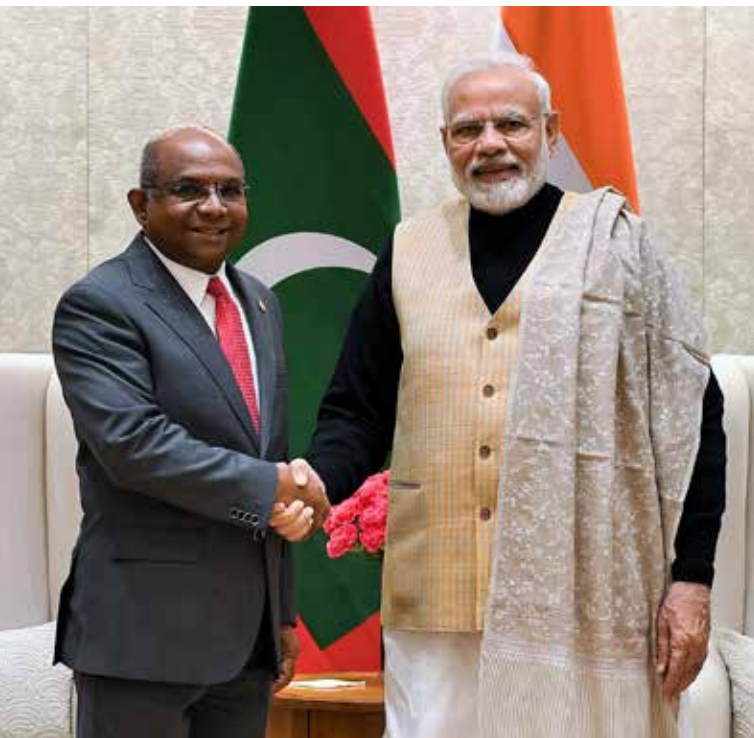


# No more playing India against China, India is a special friend: Maldives FM



Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi.

**Q) There has been a marked upswing in the India-Maldives relations since the new regime headed by President Ibrahim Solih took charge in Male. How do you look at the current play of the India-Maldives relations?**

**A)** Yes, there has been an intensification in relations. I have been to India six times in the last 14 months. The President (Ibrahim Mohamed Solih) has been to India twice; once to Delhi, and once to Bengaluru. PM Modi has visited the Maldives. PM Modi and President Solih also met on the sidelines of the UNGA in New York in September 2019. We are seeing a frequent exchange of high-

level visits. This is unprecedented. Clearly, this is an unprecedented level of interaction between the two countries. Now the real question is why is this happening? Because there is mutual respect and confidence between both the leaders and the governments. When it comes to India and the Maldives, many people say: "How can you have a balanced relationship with such a big country?" My answer is that when we sit with India, we don't see the size. We see the respect and understanding. So, it is not a matter of size of the country but what we believe in - the principles and values.

**(Excerpts from the interview)**

**Q) During the previous dispensation in Male led by Abdulla Yameen, the Maldives turned unabashedly pro-China. This distortion now seems to be corrected. Do you foresee rivalry between India and China in the Maldives?**

**A:** The mistake the previous government did was to play China against India and India against China. While I was in opposition as foreign affairs spokesperson, I highlighted the mistake which the previous government made because you can't play one against the other; there was no need and there is no need to play this game. One is doing such things because one doesn't have principles. These are very narrow-minded policies. You should base your international relations on principles. The Maldives has a relationship with everyone. All countries who respect international law and respect the Maldives is a friend of ours. But it does not mean that we can't have special friends. For geographic, strategic and historic reasons, our immediate neighbour India is a special friend.

**Q) And you don't see any change in the Maldives' positioning of India as a special friend in months to come?**

**A)** It shouldn't change. You can't push India away from the Maldives geographically. The reality is that India and the Maldives should have a special relationship. That relationship will only give both the countries an assurance of strategic security that we both need.

**Q) Looking ahead, in terms of trade and investment and in terms of development cooperation, how will this special relationship be reflected?**

**A)** India has been very generous to us. During President Solih's visit, India pledged \$1.4 billion aid package, a currency swap between the two central banks and concessional loans of \$800 million. We are working on many projects through that programme. Some projects have already started, and some are on their way. This year, we will see many major projects under this programme being realised. Detailed project proposals on some of the larger projects like the Greater Male Connectivity Bridge are being done. Part of the Addu Development Project is already underway. The point I wish to stress is that India and the Maldives are democracies and therefore we will do everything through transparent means. This might take a little bit more time, but I believe it is a better way to do things.

On the economic front, since the new government came in, during the last 14 months we have had a 105% increase in tourist arrivals from India to the Maldives. Seven cities are connected from India to the Maldives. We are working on more. So, the more the connectivity between the two countries, the more tourists one can expect to visit.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih during his visit to the island nation in June 2019.