

MALDIVES SAYS INDIA A SPECIAL FRIEND AMID WARMING TIES

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NEW DELHI: The Maldives perceives India as a “special friend” and will be sensitive to the country’s security and strategic concerns, the country’s foreign minister Abdulla Shahid said on Monday, reflecting Male’s efforts to rebalance ties with New Delhi and Beijing.

Shahid, in New Delhi for discussions with his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj ahead of Maldives Prime Minister Ibrahim Mohamed Solih’s first visit to the country and to explore ways to deal with the financial crisis in Maldives, said India will “always be a special friend”. “India is the largest contributor of our development for decades. China contributes the largest tourist arrivals and has been generous in assistance. We will not compare friends but we have friends and special friends,” he told ANI.

Solih’s surprise victory in the September general election provided an opportunity for India to improve relations with the Indian Ocean archipelago, which dipped to an all-time low under former president Abdulla Yameen.

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Following a crackdown on the Opposition, Yameen turned to China for support and backing for massive infrastructure projects.

Shahid accused Yameen of trying to play "India against China" and said: "The previous government... increased anti-India sentiments for their own purposes. We will change it... Our government will make sure the Mal-

dives-India relationship is on a better footing," he said.

Beijing poured billions of dollars into infrastructure projects and Solih's aides have said the Chinese debt could be more than \$1.5 billion, or more than a quarter of the Maldives' annual GDP.

"Yameen has taken the country to the brink of bankruptcy. We need urgent assistance to (cope with) the budget issues we are having," he said. He added the new government of the Maldives is looking for "generous assistance" from India and other countries for coping with this debt and delivering on promises it has made to the people.

Shahid also said the Maldives will retain two Indian military helicopters, which Yameen wanted to return to India. "They are being used for humanitarian purposes... We are grateful to India for providing these. We will continue to engage with India for all our needs and requirements," he said.

A statement from the external affairs ministry quoted Swaraj as saying that India attaches the "highest importance" to its ties with the Maldives and in line with the government "Neighbourhood First" policy, and New Delhi is ready to fully support Male in terms of socio-economic development.

The statement quoted Shahid as reiterating his government's "India First" policy and saying that the Maldives looks forward to working closely with India on all issues.

The foreign ministers agreed Solih's state visit to India will take place on December 17. They also discussed ways to strengthen the bilateral development partnership. "India assured the Maldives of support in implementing its development priorities and in ensuring fiscal and budgetary stability," the statement said.

Swaraj and Shahid also discussed security and defence matters, including ongoing projects and new areas of cooperation. They agreed to hold the next meeting of the Defence Cooperation Dialogue in the first half of December.

Shahid, who was accompanied by finance minister Ibrahim Ameer and economic development minister Fayyaz Ismail, also met defence minister Nir-mala Sitharaman.