MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

MP-IDSA
Issue Brief

President Muizzu's Visit to Pakistan: Whither Maldives-Pakistan Bilateral Relations?

Gulbin Sultana

November 06, 2026

Summary

Twenty Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), including on defence cooperation and maritime security cooperation, were exchanged during the State visit of Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu to Pakistan from 20 October to 22 October 2026. Muizzu noted that the visit "marked a significant milestone in the 60-year diplomatic relationship between the two nations", a sentiment echoed by Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu visited Pakistan from 20 October to 22 October 2026 at the invitation of Pakistani Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif. The main purpose of the visit was to strengthen and consolidate bilateral relations across various sectors, based on a shared Islamic identity. Muizzu held talks with Sharif, President Asif Ali Zardari, Deputy PM and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Ishaq Dar, the Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, Speaker of the National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, and Chairman of the Senate Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani. He also addressed the Maldives–Pakistan Business Forum in Islamabad. The visit has sparked concern among the Maldivian opposition leaders and Indian commentators. The brief presents the outcome of the visit, explores its significance and implications. In final remarks, the brief answers the question: should India be worried?

Outcome of the Visit

During the official talks between President Muizzu and PM Sharif, the two leaders outlined joint priorities for bilateral relations across key sectors, which include trade and investment, health and education, environment and tourism, fisheries and agriculture, youth and sports, defence and security, training and capacity-building, as well as regional and multilateral cooperation.[1] The two countries exchanged 20 Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), including on defence cooperation and maritime security cooperation.[2]

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to translate the agreements and understandings reached into tangible outcomes and increase bilateral trade from US$ 13 million to US$ 200 million in two years. PM Sharif also announced Pakistan's contribution of 100,000 olive cuttings and 100,000 seeds of various plant species to support Maldives' five-million-tree initiatives to achieve national environmental goals.[3]

The two leaders also reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen cooperation in the United Nations (UN), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and other multilateral fora on shared international priorities.[4] Maldives has joined the Saudi-led Multilateral Maritime Defence Cooperation (MMDC), where Pakistan is also a

[1] **"The Maldives and Pakistan Hold Official Talks"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 21 October 2026.

[2] **"President Witnesses Exchange of Key MoUs between the Maldives and Pakistan"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 21 October 2026.

[3] **"President Accentuates a 'New Era' of Maldives–Pakistan Partnership Following Historic Bilateral Discussions"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 21 October 2026.

[4] **"The Maldives and Pakistan Hold Official Talks"**, no. 1.

member. Muizzu commended Pakistan's diplomatic efforts during the ongoing West Asian crisis.[5]

Reportedly, Sharif raised the Kashmir issue and the Indus Water Treaty during the bilateral talks, but Muizzu refrained from commenting publicly. Muizzu, for his part, raised the issue of reviving SAARC and emphasised the importance of rebuilding trust and fostering meaningful dialogue among member countries.[6] According to Muizzu, the visit and the exchange of the MoUs ushered in a new era of cooperation and "marked a significant milestone in the 60-year diplomatic relationship between the two nations", a sentiment echoed by Sharif.[7]

60 Years of Bilateral Relations

The two countries established diplomatic relations on 26 July 1966. The two nations managed their diplomatic relations through non-resident ambassadorship until Pakistan established a formal resident diplomatic mission in Malé in 1983, and the Maldives established a resident diplomatic mission in Islamabad in July 2008. Cooperation in the banking and financial sector began in 1976 when Pakistan's Habib Bank Limited (HBL) opened its branch in Malé.

Bilateral relations gained momentum only after the heads of the two states made their first-ever state visit to each other's country in the early 1980s. Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom visited Pakistan in 1984, and Pakistani President Zia Ul Hoque visited the Maldives in 1985. During General Zia's visit, the two countries signed an agreement for economic and technical cooperation, under which Pakistan agreed to provide the Maldives with long-term, interest-free credit to import several items, including machinery and steel products. Pakistan also agreed to provide training facilities in medicine and nursing, foreign service, public administration, banking, legal fields and sports; technical assistance in a water purification project; and the supply of medicines to the Maldives. The two countries also agreed to expand cooperation in trade, culture and shipping.[8]

In subsequent years, bilateral engagements at the highest level were not frequent. After 1985, bilateral state visits by the head of state or government were in 1991, 1998, 2015, 2017 and finally in 2026. Most of their engagements were at the

[5] **"Statement to the Press by His Excellency Dr Mohamed Muizzu President of the Republic of Maldives at the Joint Press Conference with His Excellency Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 21 October 2026.

[6] Ibid.

[7] **"President Accentuates a 'New Era' of Maldives–Pakistan Partnership Following Historic Bilateral Discussions"**, no. 3.

[8] Sabiha Hasan, **"Pakistan Foreign Policy-Quarterly Survey"**, *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1986, pp. 3–19.

multilateral fora. Progress in implementing bilateral agreements and commitments was quite slow.

Table 1. Maldivian Presidents' Visit to Pakistan

President	Year	Purpose
Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	1984	State visit
Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	1988	To attend the SAARC Summit
Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	1991	State visit
Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	2004	To attend the SAARC Summit
Abdulla Yameen	2015	State visit
Mohamed Muizzu	2026	State Visit

Source: Compiled by the author based on information available at the **President's Office, Republic of Maldives**.

Table 2. Pakistani PMs'/Presidents' Visit to Maldives

President /PM	Year	Purpose
President Zia-ul-Haq	1985	State visit
PM Nawaz Sharif	1990	To attend the SAARC Summit
PM Nawaz Sharif	1997	To attend the SAARC Summit
PM Nawaz Sharif	1998	To inaugurate the Parliament building
PM Shaukat Aziz	2004	As the outgoing Chairman of SAARC, he visited all the member countries
PM Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani	2011	To attend the SAARC Summit
PM Nawaz Sharif	2017	State Visit

Source: Compiled by the author based on information available at the **President's Office, Republic of Maldives**.

Bilateral cooperation until 2015 mostly focused on human resources, institutional development, and capacity-building programmes by Pakistan. Such programmes include technical assistance in the preparation of the Maldives' fourth constitution, scholarships to 4/5 Maldivian students to study in Pakistan in the areas of medicine,

engineering, pharmacy and dentistry,[9] capacity-building programmes for Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff, enhancing the professional development and capacity-building of Maldives Islamic Bank (MIB) staff[10] and sending Pakistani doctors and paramedical staff to work in the Maldives health sector.[11]

Pakistan extended humanitarian assistance to the Maldives during the 2004 tsunami. Pakistani naval ships with two helicopters coordinated the rescue operation along with the emergency cell of the Maldives Coast Guard. Reportedly, the relief staff of Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) Tariq rescued 367 tourists, including individuals from Pakistan, the USA, the UK, Germany, Holland and other European countries, from around 100 nautical miles south of Malé.[12]

Pakistan's developmental grant assistance programme for Maldives includes financing for the establishment of an Islamic Centre in Malé,[13] the construction and repair of the Parliament Building, a donation for the Malé Water Management Crisis Fund,[14] setting up an intensive care unit at Hulhumale Hospital[15] and the construction of a medical school and teaching hospital.[16]

Since 2015, the two countries have expressed their commitment to deeper engagement in security and defence, and the environment. During President Abdulla Yameen's visit to Pakistan in 2015, the two countries signed an MoU on cooperation in combating illicit trafficking and abuse of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors. The MoU institutionalised the mechanism to address the drugs problem in the Maldives, which reportedly originates mostly from Pakistan.

---

[9] There is no fixed number of scholarships. See **"Announcement for Pakistan Technical Assistance 2020 - 2021 Scholarships"**, Ministry of Higher Education, Labour and Skills Development, Republic of Maldives, 20 October 2020.

[10] Maldives Islamic Bank (MIB) has entered into a strategic partnership with the National Institute of Banking and Finance (NIBAF) Pakistan through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at enhancing the professional development and capacity-building of MIB staff. See Mohamed Shabhaan, **"Maldives Islamic Bank Signs MoU with NIBAF Pakistan to Strengthen Professional Development"**, Maldives Islamic Bank, 22 November 2025.

[11] **"Parliament Building Symbolises Strong Maldives–Pakistan Relations: Speaker"**, *MMTV*, 17 December 2025.

[12] **"Maldives: Navy Assisting in Tsunami Relief"**, *Reliefweb*, 30 December 2004.

[13] The Islamic Centre in Male was officially opened in November 1984. See **"A Summarized Translation of the Inaugural Address delivered by His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives, at the Official Opening of the Grand Mosque and the Islamic Centre, Male"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 11 November 1984.

[14] US$ 2 million for repairing of the building and US$ 1.1 million was donated by Pakistan. See **"Pakistan Donates 3 Million Dollars of Financial Aid to Maldives"**, *SEE,* 30 June 2015.

[15] **"Vice President Calls for a Concerted Effort to Curb Street Violence"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 2 August 2010.

[16] PM Nawaz Sharif, during his visit to the Maldives in 2017, announced the establishment of a Medical College in the Maldives, fully resourced by the Pakistani government. It is an ongoing project. See **"Pakistani Prime Minister Announces Establishment of Medical College in Maldives"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 25 July 2017; **"Pakistan Extends Donation for MNU's Medical School and Teaching Hospital Construction"**, *PSM News*, 9 February 2024.

Defence staff talks between the two countries were launched in 2015.[17] Reportedly, Pakistan announced a US$ 10 million credit line facility during President Yameen's visit to the country. The issue was discussed further during then Defence Minister of Maldives Adam Shareef Umar's visit to Pakistan in May 2016, and the two sides agreed to sign the agreement by July 2016. According to Minister Umar, the credit facility was to be used to buy two planes for tactical training and surveillance, and vehicles to carry men along with military weapons.[18] However, the two countries never signed such an agreement. The reason for shelving the understanding remains unclear. Pakistan and the Maldives' existing defence cooperation includes joint naval exercises, goodwill visits, training of MNDF officials in Pakistan, and defence staff talks.

Despite signing the economic and technical cooperation agreement in 1985, bilateral trade and investment have progressed little. During Nawaz Sharif's visit to the Maldives in 2017, the two countries agreed to form the Maldives–Pakistan Joint Business Council and Joint Working Group on Trade to promote business, trade and investment cooperation; enhance collaboration among private-sector operators; and strengthen institutional relations.[19] Yet the bilateral trade in 2025 was recorded at US$ 13 million.

HBL, the second-oldest bank in the Maldives, is the only Pakistani investor in the banking and financial sector. The cumulative assets of its two branches in Malé and Hulhumale are close to MVR 3 billion (US$ 182 million), and its loan portfolio was about MVR 660 million in 2021, while its deposits totalled MVR 2.20 billion.[20]

Pakistan's contribution to the Maldives tourism sector is minimal. In 2017, the two countries signed an MoU on tourism matters. Despite the MoU, the number of Pakistani tourists in the Maldives has been declining since 2021. In 2025, the total number of tourists from Pakistan was 8,140. In contrast, the number of Maldivian tourists to Pakistan is very low. A few hundred students travel to Pakistan to obtain education, including religious education.

Table 3. Pakistani Tourists to Maldives

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Pakistani Tourists to Maldives	13,764	9,736	7,248	7,772	8,140

Source: ***2026 Tourism Yearbook***, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, 18 October 2026.

[17] Mohamed Jinah Ali, **"MNDF Starts Defense Staff Talks with Pakistan"**, *PSM News*, 16 May 2017.

[18] **"USD 10 Million from Pakistan to Buy Two Planes and Weapons"**, *SunOnline*, 27 May 2016.

[19] **"Pakistani Prime Minister Announces Establishment of Medical College in Maldives"**, no. 16.

[20] **"Habib Bank Limited (HBL)"**, *Maldives Financial Review*, 31 December 2021.

One of the main reasons for the lack of trade, investment and tourism cooperation is the absence of direct air or shipping connections between the two countries. The two countries discussed establishing shipping cooperation in 1985. Even after four decades, they have made no progress in this area.

Significance of the Muizzu Visit

According to Muizzu, the bilateral relationship's potential has not been fully tapped, and the failure to implement past MoUs has slowed progress. The 20 MoUs signed during Muizzu's visit cover several areas where MoUs were signed in the past, as well as new areas of cooperation. This indicates an eagerness to review past MoUs from a fresh perspective and achieve tangible outcomes. If the signed MoUs are implemented, bilateral cooperation will broaden significantly.

The visit has created scope to explore new areas of cooperation and take the relationship forward. Acknowledging the main challenge in deepening economic cooperation and people-to-people connections, the two sides have prioritised connectivity by planning direct flights between Male and Karachi and proposing direct sea corridors between the Maldives and Pakistan.

Given the limited tradable items and limited scope of investment in both countries, Muizzu has clearly outlined the potential areas for Pakistani investment in the Maldives, which include cold-chain logistics, temperature-controlled storage, modern food processing, climate-adaptive agricultural technology, pharmaceuticals and medical supplies for the health sector, the construction and engineering sector, renewable energy, Shariah-compliant financing, sukuk issuance and halal value chain.[21] During his address to the Maldives–Pakistan Business Forum, Muizzu urged the Pakistani investors to "not view the Maldives merely as an export destination, but as a strategic platform to scale products and services into wider international markets".[22]

In short, compared to the past, the latest engagement has broadened the avenues of new areas of cooperation, such as agriculture, fisheries, Information Technology, Cyber Security, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Skills and Technology and Innovation, connectivity, youth exchange programme and, last but not least, defence and maritime security.

[21] **"President Invites Pakistani Businesses to Partner in the Economic Transformation of the Maldives"**, The President's Office, Republic of Maldives, 22 October 2026.

[22] Ibid.

Reaction of Maldivian Opposition

Maldivian opposition leaders expressed serious concerns about the outcome of Muizzu's visit to Pakistan, particularly the signing of MoUs in sensitive areas such as defence, maritime security and cyber, and the lack of transparency around them. Opposition leaders' main concern is that these non-transparent deals with Pakistan in sensitive areas may have serious strategic repercussions for the Maldives. According to Mohamed Nasheed, the visit would place the Maldives in the middle of the longstanding dispute between India and Pakistan and thus poses a challenge to the Maldives' security, because if India perceives its own safety being compromised by the implementation of the defence and maritime security agreements, it could have a severe impact on the Maldives.[23]

Former Defence Minister of the Maldives Maria Didi argues that, for a small country,

> foreign policy is not simply about cultivating friendships or signing agreements. It is about protecting sovereignty, safeguarding economic future and ensuring that the rivalries of larger powers do not become a burden.[24]

Therefore, opposition leaders are urging the government to disclose the scope, financial implications, and provisions for reviewing and terminating the signed MoUs.[25] The opposition, however, believes that cooperation in healthcare, education, trade, agriculture and tourism offers genuine opportunities, and therefore Maldives should maintain relations with Pakistan in these areas.[26]

Should India be Worried?

As a sovereign country, the Maldives has the right to engage with foreign countries in line with its national interests. The visit, as the government mentions, was in line with its 'Maldives First' policy. One of the basic principles of the 'Maldives First' policy is to diversify its foreign policy. The visit should be viewed as part of its broader commitment to that principle and to strengthening relations with its South Asian neighbours. During his engagements, Muizzu avoided making any public comments on Sharif's remarks on Kashmir and the Indus Water Treaty. In doing so, Muizzu

---

[23] Azhaar Abdul Azeez, **"Nasheed Says Keeping President Muizzu in Power Now Would be a Major Loss for Maldives"**, *SunOnline*, 24 October 2026.

[24] Mariya Ahmed Didi, **"The Maldives on a Geopolitical Tightrope: President Muizzu's Pakistan Visit, Strategic Autonomy and the Risks to Maldivian Security and Prosperity"**, *Adhadhu*, 25 October 2026.

[25] **"Interview of Abdulla Shaheed, Former Foreign Minister of Maldives with Siddhant Sibal"**, *WION*, 28 October 2026.

[26] Mariya Ahmed Didi, **"The Maldives on a Geopolitical Tightrope: President Muizzu's Pakistan Visit, Strategic Autonomy and the Risks to Maldivian Security and Prosperity"**, no. 24.

demonstrated the Maldives' traditional position of neutrality on the India–Pakistan dispute. However, this diplomatic silence is open to interpretation.

One of the major concerns for India, as well as for the Maldives and the region during 2000–2010, was the reports on radicalisation of Maldivian youths studying in Pakistani madrasas who subsequently joined foreign Jihadi groups. A Maldivian radical Islamist was reported to have been part of the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai.[27] In late 2013, Indian intelligence had received information that eight Maldivians were called to join a Mumbai-like attack on another city.[28]

As the threat of violent extremism and radicalism loomed large, India and Maldives formed a Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and De-Radicalisation in 2021. At the Joint Working Group meetings held in 2021 and 2023, 'India and the Maldives strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including cross-border terrorism'.[29] In this context, Muizzu's silence on Shehbaz Sharif's remarks on Kashmir invites conjecture.

Some Indian commentators have expressed concerns about the MoU on defence cooperation and maritime security.[30] The main concern is that the details of these agreements are not disclosed. The lack of information on the scope of the MoUs, the level of operational commitments, and the conditions attached is allowing lots of speculation. Without details of those MoUs, the Government of India decided not to react but to watch developments in Maldives–Pakistan relations.[31] New Delhi can therefore remain watchful rather than worry about the unfolding developments.

Annexure: List of MoUs

1. MoU in the fields of Information Technology, Cyber Security, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Skills and Technology and Innovation.
2. MoU on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Trafficking and Abuse of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and their Precursors.

[27] Azra Naseem, **"The Honeymoon Is Over: Maldives as a Growing Security Threat in the Indian Ocean"**, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 26, Special focus: Conflict Resolution in South Asia, 2015, pp. 99–119.

[28] **"The Long Road from Islam to Islamism: a Short History"**, *Dhivehi Sitee,* 30 May 2014.

[29] **"Joint Press Release on First Meeting of India-Maldives Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and De-Radicalisation"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 8 April 2021; **"Second Meeting of Maldives-India Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism and De-radicalisation"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 24 July 2023.

[30] Parul Chandra, **"Maldives' Islamabad Handshake is a Warning India cannot Ignore"**, *The Federal*, 29 October 2026.

[31] **"Transcript of Bi-weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson"**, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 28 October 2026.

3. MoU on Social Protection.
4. MoU on Health Cooperation and Cooperation between the Maldives Food and Drug Authority and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan.
5. MoU on Recruitment of Health Professionals.
6. MoU on Defence Cooperation.
7. MoU on Maritime Security Cooperation.
8. MoU on Agricultural Cooperation.
9. MoU on Fisheries Cooperation.
10. MoU on Collaboration to Promote Technical and Vocational Education and Training.
11. MoU between the Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Skills Development of the Republic of Maldives and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.
12. MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Youth and Sports Development.
13. MoU on Enhancing Air Connectivity.
14. MoU on Tourism Cooperation.
15. MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Arts, Culture and Heritage.
16. MoU between the National College of Policy and Law Enforcement of the Maldives Police Service and the National Police Academy, Islamabad.
17. MoU between the Civil Service Commission of Maldives and the Federal Public Service Commission of Pakistan.
18. MoU between the Civil Service Commission of Maldives and the Civil Service Academy of Pakistan.
19. MoU between the State Trading Organisation of Maldives and the Trading Corporation of Pakistan on Cooperation in Trade of Agricultural Commodities, Food and Other Products.
20. MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Environment.

About the Author



Dr. Gulbin Sultana is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2026

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg
New Delhi 110 010 India
T +91-11-2671 7983 F +91-11-2615 4191
www.idsa.in
Twitter @IDSAIndia
www.facebook.com/ManoharParrikarInstituteforDefenceStudiesAnalyses