

# The Ontological Imperative: Navigating Selfhood and Anxieties in India-Maldives Bilateral Relations to Wards a New Diplomatic Paradigm

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## ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a detailed analysis of the India-Maldives bilateral relationship through the nuanced lens of ontological security. It posits that the complex trajectory of this dyad, marked by periods of profound *ontological dissonance* and subsequent *re-equilibration*, is not solely a function of material interests or geopolitical exigencies, but is profoundly shaped by each state's persistent pursuit of selfhood and the imperative to manage existential *anxieties*. Drawing upon the theoretical constructs of Giddens (1991), Mitzen (2006), Steele (2011), and Kleinian psychoanalysis (Gellwitzki, 2025), the analysis elucidates how India's self-perception as a benevolent regional hegemon and Maldives' struggle for sovereign *ipseity* amidst external influence have generated systemic *turbulentia*. The article demonstrates how both nations have navigated these inherent challenges, culminating in a pragmatic *modus vivendi* that signals a new paradigm rooted in interdependent *stabilitas* within their international relations.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Ontological Nexus In Bilateral Diplomacy Conceptualizing Ontological Security in International Relations

The study of International Relations (IR) has, for decades, grappled with the multifaceted nature of security, traditionally prioritizing physical or material dimensions. However, a burgeoning subfield, Ontological Security Studies (OSS), has challenged this conventional wisdom, positing that states, much like individuals, possess a fundamental, often unconscious, drive for the security of the self, or *ipseity* (Gellwitzki, 2025; Mitzen, 2006; Mitzen & Larson, 2017). This conceptualization delves into the inner desire of self-identities for a sense of continuity and stability, extending beyond mere physical survival to encompass the subjective sense of who one is, which profoundly enables and motivates state action and foreign policy choices (Gellwitzki, 2025; Mitzen & Larson, 2017). The framework of ontological security offers alternative explanations for state behaviour that might otherwise appear confounding when viewed through a purely materialist lens (Mitzen & Larson, 2017).

### Giddens's *Stabilitas* and the Routinization of Selfhood

Anthony Giddens's (1991) seminal sociological work provides the foundational understanding of ontological security, defining it as a state of being associated with a profound sense of trust in others and the perceived consistency of the world (Gellwitzki, 2025; Mitzen, 2006; Rix, 2021). For states, this translates into the cultivation of a positive, consistent, and coherent self-identity narrative. The pursuit of this *stabilitas* is primarily achieved through the establishment and performance of consistent autobiographical narratives, the cultivation of relationships with "significant others," and the routinization of practices more generally (Gellwitzki, 2025; Mitzen, 2006). These routines and self-narratives are not merely procedural; they reinforce a basic trust system that allows actors to navigate their daily international lives by effectively suppressing underlying ontological concerns and anxieties (Gellwitzki, 2025).

The emphasis on routines as central to ontological security suggests that a state's self-identity is not simply a declarative statement but is actively *performed* through consistent diplomatic practices and established relationships. This implies that when these established routines are disrupted, a profound sense of *anxieties*

emerges, threatening the state's coherent self-narrative. In the context of India-Maldives relations, India's long-standing role as the "first responder" and Maldives' historical reliance on India exemplify such deeply embedded routines. Any challenge to these established patterns, as observed during the "India Out" campaign, directly imperilled these foundational self-narratives, generating significant *anxieties* for both actors.

### **Mitzen's Attachment Theory and the *Anxieties* of Uncertainty**

Jennifer Mitzen (2006) further develops Giddens's (1991) framework by introducing an attachment theory perspective, arguing that states, like individuals, cultivate ontological security by routinizing relationships with significant others, leading to a profound attachment to these relational patterns (Mitzen, 2006). A particularly salient and counter-intuitive aspect of Mitzen's (2006) argument is the notion that this attachment can persist even in "dangerous routines." This means that states might paradoxically prefer an ongoing, predictable conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty regarding the other's identity and, by extension, their own (Mitzen, 2006). Mitzen's (2006) work thus highlights a critical dimension where the pursuit of ontological security can, at times, conflict with the imperative of physical security, as the certainty derived from a stable, albeit adversarial, relationship can outweigh the risks of an unknown future (Mitzen, 2006).

The concept that states can become "attached to conflict" offers a crucial second-order understanding of persistent rivalries. It suggests that even periods of diplomatic friction or antagonism, if they establish predictable patterns of interaction—for instance, by providing a clear "other" against which a state can define its own identity—can, in a paradoxical manner, furnish a form of ontological security by mitigating the *anxieties* associated with profound uncertainty. This helps to explain why certain rivalries might endure beyond purely material interests, as breaking free from such established patterns, even harmful ones, can generate a more profound ontological insecurity. In the India-Maldives dynamic, during periods of strained relations, the "India Out" narrative, while overtly antagonistic, could be interpreted as offering a clear, albeit negative, "other" for Maldivian identity construction, providing a certain perverse comfort in its predictability.

### **Steele's Affective Dimensions: Shame and Biographical Continuity**

Brent J. Steele (2011) enriches the ontological security framework by introducing the profound role of emotions, particularly shame, in driving the need for biographical continuity within state identity (Mitzen & Larson, 2017). Steele (2011) posits that states are metaphorically "haunted by those situations in the past where they obviously failed to live up to their standards of self-integrity, what we might term 'sources of shame'" (Steele, as cited in Mitzen & Larson, 2017, p. 907). Consequently, foreign policy choices can be profoundly influenced by a state's desire to avoid or compensate for past or prospective shame, thereby preserving its coherent self-narrative (Mitzen & Larson, 2017).

Steele's (2011) emphasis on shame moves beyond purely cognitive understandings of identity, introducing a critical affective dimension to state behaviour. This implies that perceived historical slights, failures, or compromises of sovereignty can generate deep-seated *anxieties* within a state's self-narrative. For the Maldives, any perceived Indian dominance or interference, as articulated during various periods of friction, could evoke a powerful sense of shame or a compromised *svatantratā*, thereby fuelling nationalist movements like "India Out" (Shivamurthy, 2022; Sarma & Goswami, 2023). For India, a perceived ingratitude or rejection of its established "first responder" role might similarly evoke an affective response, influencing its subsequent diplomatic posture beyond purely rational calculations. This highlights the emotional undercurrents that shape diplomatic recalibration.

### **Kleinian Perspectives: Paranoid-Schizoid and Depressive Positions in State Behaviour**

More recent scholarship in OSS has increasingly turned to Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic work to deepen the theoretical understanding of ontological (in)security (Gellwitzki, 2025). This approach conceptualizes ontological (in)security not as a binary state, but as two distinct psychological "positions"—the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive—which denote different ways in which subjects, including states, manage anxiety (Gellwitzki, 2025). The paranoid-schizoid position involves a primitive defence mechanism of "splitting" objects into idealized "good" and persecutory "bad" entities to manage overwhelming anxiety, often leading to rigid,

antagonistic self-other differentiations. Conversely, the depressive position, a more mature psychological mode, allows for the integration of "good" and "bad" aspects of the self and others, enabling more reparative and constructive anxiety management (Gellwitzki, 2025).

Applying Kleinian concepts to state behaviour offers a profound, third-order understanding of how states process and react to perceived threats to their identity. For instance, the "India Out" campaign in the Maldives could be interpreted as a manifestation of a *paranoid-schizoid position*, wherein India was "split" into a "bad object" perceived as threatening Maldivian sovereignty. This allowed for the construction of a clear, albeit antagonistic, self-other differentiation, simplifying complex anxieties into a manageable narrative. However, the recent pragmatic recalibration observed in the bilateral relationship suggests a movement towards a *depressive position*, where both states acknowledge the complex, interdependent nature of their relationship, integrating both positive and negative aspects. This shift facilitates *reparative anxiety management* and fosters a more constructive *modus vivendi*, moving beyond simplistic binaries to a more nuanced engagement. This psychodynamic lens provides a deeper understanding of state behaviour beyond traditional rational choice models.

Table 1: Key Theoretical Constructs of Ontological Security in IR

Theorist/Concept	Core Tenet	Implication for State Behaviour
Giddens (Routines, Self-Identity)	Security of the self (identity) achieved through consistent autobiographical narratives and routinized practices, fostering trust and continuity.	States perform identity through consistent diplomatic practices and relationships; disruption of routines generates <i>anxieties</i> .
Mitzen (Attachment, Dangerous Routines, Security Dilemma)	States become attached to routinized relationships, even if conflictual, as they provide certainty and reduce <i>Anxieties</i> of profound uncertainty.	States may prefer predictable conflict over uncertain cooperation; breaking established patterns can induce ontological insecurity.
Steele (Shame, Biographical Continuity)	The need for a coherent, continuous self-narrative, often driven by the avoidance of retrospective or prospective shame.	Foreign policy choices can be made to avert shame or uphold self-integrity, influencing actions beyond material interests.
Klein (Paranoid-Schizoid Position, Depressive Position)	Ontological (in)security as distinct psychological modes of managing anxiety: splitting (paranoid-schizoid) vs. integration and reparation (depressive).	States may simplify complex relations by "splitting" others into "good" or "bad" (paranoid-schizoid), or engage in more constructive, integrated approaches (depressive).

## The Geopolitical Contours of the Indo-Maldivian Dyad: A Historical Prolegomenon

The bilateral relationship between India and the Maldives is characterized by a deep historical provenance, rooted in enduring ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial linkages that stretch back to antiquity (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025). India was among the first nations to extend diplomatic recognition to the Maldives following its independence in 1965, establishing its mission in Malé in 1972 and a resident High Commissioner by 1980 (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The Maldives reciprocated by opening a full-fledged High Commission in New Delhi in November 2004, a significant gesture given it was one of only four such missions globally at the time.

The strategic salience of the Maldives for India is undeniable, primarily owing to its geographical propinquity to India's west coast—approximately 70 nautical miles from Minicoy and 300 nautical miles from the Indian mainland—and its critical location at the nexus of vital commercial sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean, particularly the 8° N and 1½° N channels (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Sarma & Goswami, 2023). This geostrategic imperative positions the Maldives as a pivotal component of India's "Neighbourhood First" foreign

policy, which seeks to foster *stabilitas* and prosperity throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a). Both nations are recognized as key players in upholding maritime safety and security within the IOR, thereby contributing to India's broader Security And Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

The enduring geopolitical gravity of proximity means that India and Maldives are, in a fundamental sense, ontologically bound. Their shared maritime space and intertwined destinies in the Indian Ocean create a constant, inherent pressure for *stabilitas* in their bilateral relationship. This underlying geographical imperative acts as a powerful, persistent force, often pushing for an eventual recalibration and re-equilibration, irrespective of temporary political rhetoric or the disruptive influences of external actors. This foundational reality underscores the profound, inescapable interdependence that characterizes their dyad.

Table 2: Major Milestones in India-Maldives Bilateral Relations (1965-Present)

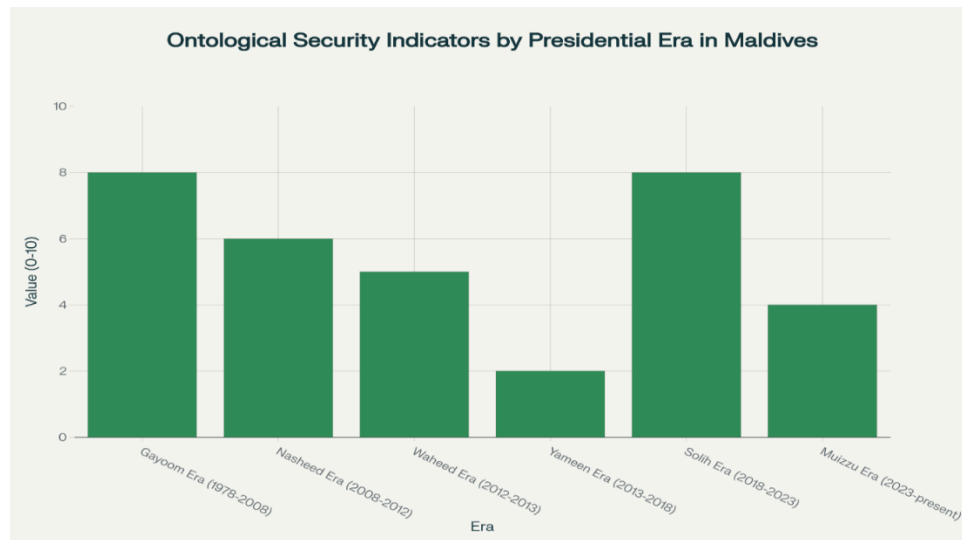
Year/Period	Key Event/Development	Nature of Relationship
1965	Independence & Diplomatic Recognition by India	Trust-building, Foundational
1988	Operation Cactus (India's military intervention)	Trust-building, Cooperation, Ontological Affirmation
1995	Inauguration of Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH)	Cooperation, Developmental Assistance
2004	Tsunami Aid from India	Trust-building, "First Responder"
2013-2018	Yameen Presidency & Maldives joins China's BRI (2014)	Ontological Strain, Strategic Re-orientation
2014	Malé Water Crisis Aid from India	Trust-building, "First Responder"
2015	Arrest of former President Nasheed; India expresses concern	Ontological Strain, Diplomatic Friction
2020-2023	"India Out" Campaign gains prominence	Ontological Rupture, Crisis of Mutual Recognition
Jan 2024	Diplomatic row over derogatory remarks; "Boycott Maldives"	Ontological Rupture, Economic Consequence
Nov 2023 - May 2024	Muizzu Presidency & Troop Withdrawal	Pragmatic Re-equilibration, Strategic Accommodation
July 2025	New \$565M LoC in INR; Debt Reduction; FTA talks; "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership"	New Paradigm, Ontological Coexistence

### Thesis Statement: Ontological Security as a Critical, Often Subterranean, Determinant of Bilateral State Behaviour

This article posits that the fluctuations and recalibrations in India-Maldives bilateral relations are not solely attributable to material interests or geopolitical balancing, but are profoundly shaped by the pursuit and contestation of *ontological security* by both states. The dialectic between India's self-perception as a benevolent regional hegemon and Maldives' struggle for sovereign *ipseity* amidst external influence has generated periods

of *Anxieties* and *ontological dissonance*, ultimately necessitating a pragmatic re-equilibration towards a new paradigm of *interdependent stabilitas*.

Fig. 1 Ontological Security Indicators Across Different Presidential Eras in Maldives



*Comparative analysis of ontological security indicators across different presidential eras in Maldives*

## India's Ontological Selfhood: A Civilizational Continuum and Strategic Autonomy

### The *Ātman* of Indian Foreign Policy: From *Sanātana Dharma* to *Strategia Sui Iuris*

India's ontological security is deeply interwoven with its civilizational ethos, embodying a remarkable continuity of *ātman* (self-identity) and *svatantratā* (autonomy) that transcends mere political or economic calculations (Monnappa, 2025a). This profound resilience is traceable to a *pūrvapakṣa* (historical legacy) shaped by millennia of *saṃskṛti* (culture) and *dharma* (righteous conduct) (Monnappa, 2025a). The post-1947 era, marked by *svatantratā divasa* (Independence Day), necessitated a pivotal redefinition of India's ontological security, as the nascent nation faced the formidable imperative to forge a cohesive identity from a complex *conglomeratus identitatis* of regional, linguistic, and cultural affiliations (Monnappa, 2025b).

The deep ontological roots of India's strategic posture imply that its foreign policy is not merely reactive but profoundly informed by its historical and civilizational *ātman*. This means that India's actions, including its approach to smaller neighbours like the Maldives, function as performative acts that reinforce its established state identity (Monnappa, 2025b). The pursuit of "strategic autonomy" (Monnappa, 2025b) is therefore not simply a pragmatic choice in a multipolar world, but an ontological imperative—a means of maintaining its self-worth, agency, and unique position within the international system. This underlying drive helps to explain India's consistent, long-term approach to the Maldives, even when confronted with temporary periods of diplomatic friction or perceived challenges to its regional role.

### Non-Alignment as Ontological Anchor: Navigating Cold War Bipolarity and Post-Liberalization Flux

During the Cold War era, Nehruvian principles of *non-alligatio* (non-alignment) served as a crucial *ontological anchor*, instrumental in preserving India's autonomy and distinct identity amidst the ideological polarization of the bipolar world (Monnappa, 2025a). Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of *strategia sui iuris* (strategic autonomy) seamlessly integrated the ancient philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family") with pragmatic diplomacy, thereby positioning India as a bastion of *prudentia* (wisdom) and democratic values—a *janatantriya* (republican) governance underpinned by an intrinsic respect for *saṃvidhāna* (constitutionality) (Monnappa, 2025a). This adaptive framework profoundly reinforced the narrative of a self-affirming nation capable of asserting its identity in *res publica* (global public affairs) without relinquishing its foundational ethos (Monnappa, 2025a).



The 1991 economic *reformaes* marked another critical juncture in India's ontological evolution. As the nation embarked on a path of economic liberalization and globalization, it deftly *adaptans* (adapting) to new economic realities while meticulously safeguarding its core values, an exercise in *yukti* (strategic wisdom) (Monnappa, 2025a). This historical trajectory underscores that non-alignment, and its contemporary manifestation as strategic autonomy, functions as a core *ontological anchor* for India. It provides psychological stability and reinforces India's identity amidst the inherent uncertainties of the international system (Monnappa, 2025a). This framework suggests that India's interactions with the Maldives are not solely driven by material power projection but are also deeply intertwined with the validation of its own self-perception as an autonomous, responsible, and benevolent regional actor. Any perceived challenge to this fundamental *ancrage* from the Maldives would inevitably trigger an ontological response from India, extending beyond mere material calculations to touch upon its core identity.

### **The "First Responder" Ethos: Routinized Benevolence and Identity Affirmation in the Indian Ocean Region**

India's consistent and proactive role as the "first responder" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a deeply ingrained routine that serves as a powerful affirmation of its *ātman* as a responsible regional power (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a). This commitment has been demonstrably evident across various crises, including the swift and decisive intervention during the 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024), the provision of immediate relief following the 2004 Tsunami (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024), the rapid assistance during the 2014 Malé water crisis (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024), and the comprehensive support extended during the COVID-19 pandemic (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). A critical aspect of the 1988 intervention was the immediate withdrawal of Indian troops once their mission was accomplished, a deliberate act that assuaged Maldivian fears of Indian dominance or territorial aspirations, thereby fostering long-term trust and friendly bilateral relations (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

This "first responder" identity is not merely a policy choice; it is a profound performative enactment of India's ontological security-seeking behaviour (Monnappa, 2025b). It serves to demonstrate India's commitment to *atmashakti* (self-power) and a narrative that transcends purely realist power-balancing imperatives (Monnappa, 2025b). The consistent fulfilment of this role reinforces India's self-perception as a benevolent and reliable regional actor. The "First Responder" role constitutes a crucial component of India's *ātman* as a responsible regional power. When this deeply ingrained role is challenged or dismissed, as exemplified by the "India Out" campaign (Shivamurthy, 2022; Sarma & Goswami, 2023), it generates significant *ontological insecurity* for India, threatening its core self-narrative. This is not merely a diplomatic slight but is perceived as an attack on its fundamental identity. India's subsequent strategic patience and recalibrated engagement, characterized by a pragmatic approach (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b), can be understood as a deliberate effort to restore this ontological *stabilitas* and re-affirm its identity through continued, albeit adjusted, benevolent engagement. This approach underscores the profound importance of maintaining its self-narrative in the face of external challenges.

### **Maldives' Contested Selfhood: Sovereignty, Identity Flux, and the Geopolitical Crucible**

#### **The Archipelagic *Ipseity*: State-Building, Democratic Transitions, and Identity Articulation**

The foreign policy behaviour of the Maldives, particularly its periodic shifts and re-orientations, is fundamentally rooted in contested ideas about Maldivian state identity and the ongoing, often tumultuous, processes of state-building (Yadav, 2025). Identities, in this context, are understood as relational and procedural constructs, continuously formed and re-formed through ongoing interaction and social learning within both domestic and international spheres (Yadav, 2025). These identities serve a crucial function: they define who a state is and who other states are in relation to it, thereby implying specific interests and shaping appropriate behaviour in the international system (Yadav, 2025).

Maldivian political elites, as authoritative agents, play a central role in the construction and articulation of this state identity, although their agency is inherently constrained by both domestic political structures and systemic international pressures (Yadav, 2025). This dynamic suggests that state identities are neither static nor rigid; rather, they are flexible, multiple, layered, and perpetually contestable by various political factions and societal forces (Yadav, 2025).

For a small island nation like the Maldives, its *ipseity* (distinct selfhood) is inherently more vulnerable to the profound influences of external actors and the internal contestations of its nascent democratic processes (Yadav, 2025). The democratic transition initiated in 2008, for instance, opened significant political space for competition, which inevitably spilled over into the realm of external relations, leading to divergent foreign policy preferences among different political parties and administrations (Shivamurthy, 2022; Yadav, 2025). These inherent internal anxieties concerning self-definition renders Maldivian foreign policy susceptible to rapid shifts, as various political factions endeavour to define the nation's *ātman* in relation to external powers. This complex interplay is not merely about geopolitical balancing; it represents a deeper, ongoing struggle for national self-understanding and the assertion of a coherent *ipseity* in a challenging regional environment.

### **The "India Out" Campaign: A Discursive Manifestation of Ontological Insecurity and Sovereignty Contestation**

The "India Out" campaign, officially launched in October 2020, emerged as a significant and contentious phenomenon in India-Maldives relations (Shivamurthy, 2022). Spearheaded primarily by opposition parties, notably the People's National Congress (PNC) under the leadership of Mohamed Muizzu, the campaign skilfully exploited pre-existing anti-India sentiments within certain segments of the Maldivian populace (Shivamurthy, 2022; Sarma & Goswami, 2023; Jeelani, 2025; Samaranayake, 2023). Its explicit objective was to cultivate animosity by fostering scepticism regarding India's substantial investments, its defence partnerships, and its role as a net security provider in the archipelago (Shivamurthy, 2022).

The genesis of this campaign was deeply rooted in contested interpretations of Maldivian sovereignty and a perceived encroachment of Indian influence or presence (Naish, 2025; Shivamurthy, 2022; Samaranayake, 2023; Yadav, 2025). President Muizzu's ascent to power was inextricably linked to the "India Out" platform, with his campaign prominently featuring the pledge to secure the withdrawal of India's security presence as a paramount priority for preserving Maldivian sovereignty (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Samaranayake, 2023). This narrative gained considerable traction, culminating in a diplomatic row in January 2024 following derogatory remarks made by Maldivian cabinet ministers against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which subsequently triggered a "Boycott Maldives" trend in India and a notable decline in Indian tourist arrivals to the island nation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

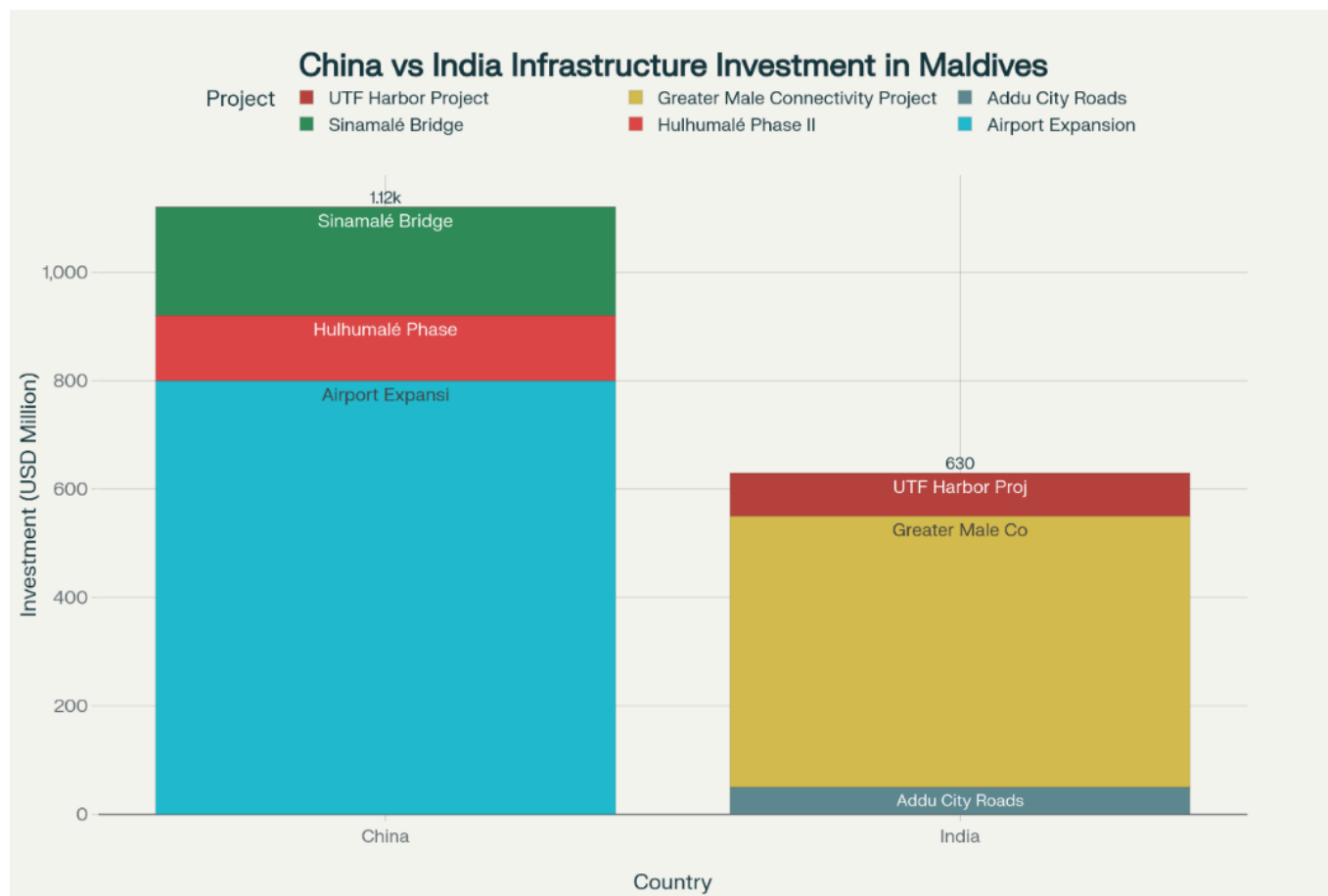
The "India Out" campaign transcended mere political sloganeering; it constituted a profound *discursive construction* (Yadav, 2025) explicitly designed to address a perceived *ontological insecurity* within the Maldivian body politic (Shivamurthy, 2022). By framing India as a direct threat to Maldivian *sovereignty* and *svatantratā* (Naish, 2025; Samaranayake, 2023; Yadav, 2025), the campaign provided a clear "other" against which Maldivian *ipseity* could be re-affirmed. This act of "splitting" the relationship into a simplistic binary of "good" (Maldives) versus "bad" (India) aligns with the Kleinian *paranoid-schizoid position* (Gellwitski, 2025). It allowed for a simplified, albeit antagonistic, narrative to manage the complex anxieties inherent in a small state navigating great power competition. The considerable success of the campaign underscored its deep resonance with a segment of the Maldivian population that perceived their national selfhood as being compromised, demonstrating the potent influence of such identity-based narratives on foreign policy.

### **The Sino-Indian Nexus *Securitatis*: Maldivian Agency Amidst Great Power Competition**

Maldivian foreign policy, particularly in recent years, has become inextricably entangled in the broader geopolitical rivalry between India and China (Mohamed, 2025). This entanglement intensified significantly after the Maldives formally joined China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2014 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Mohamed, 2025). China's burgeoning presence in the archipelago, characterized by substantial economic largesse and extensive infrastructure projects—such as the iconic China-Maldives Friendship Bridge

and various social housing initiatives—has been widely perceived by India as a direct challenge to its traditional regional influence and strategic prerogatives (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Salih, 2023; Mohamed, 2025).

Fig. 2 Chinese vs Indian Infrastructure Investment in Maldives



### Comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian infrastructure investments in Maldives by project value

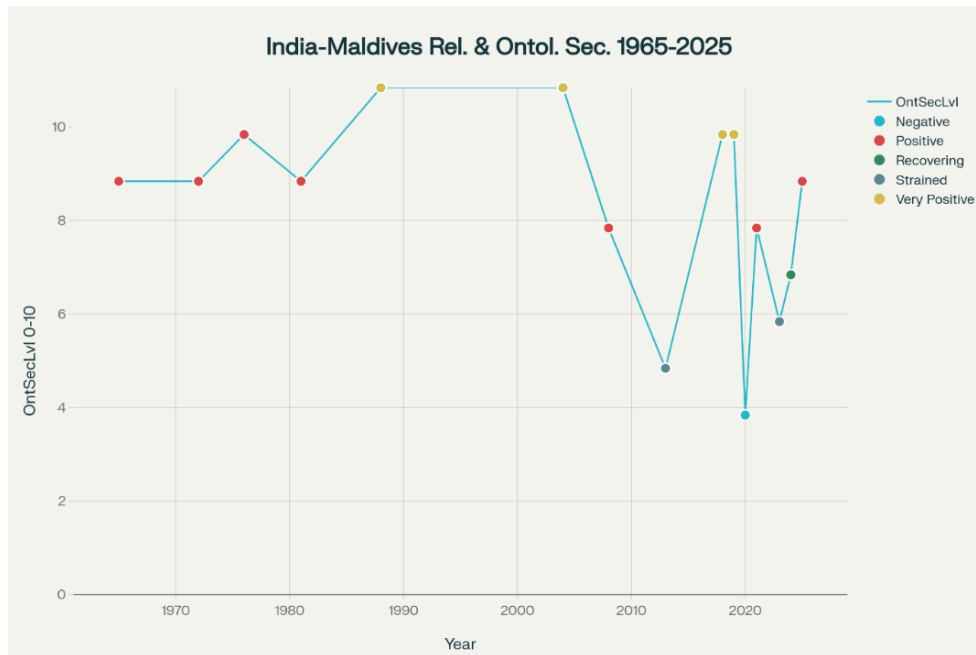
Successive Maldivian administrations have, in response to these dynamics, exhibited a pattern of oscillation between policies favouring closer ties with India and those aligning more closely with China (Mohamed, 2025). These policy swings are not merely arbitrary; they are largely driven by the Maldives' inherent economic deficiencies and the constantly evolving geopolitical environment of the Indian Ocean (Mohamed, 2025). This strategic behaviour is often characterized by analysts as a "hedging" strategy, rather than a definitive choice of outright balancing against or band-wagging with either major power (Yadav, 2025). The Maldives seeks to maximize economic and security benefits by engaging with both, without fully committing to either's geopolitical orbit.

The Maldives' engagement with both India and China, while pragmatically driven by economic and security considerations, presents a profound *ontological dilemma* for the island nation. Constantly shifting allegiances or maintaining a delicate balancing act can, over time, generate internal *ontological dissonance* concerning the state's true *ātman* and its stable role in the international system. The "India Out" campaign, by explicitly identifying India as a threatening "other" and implicitly favouring China, represented a concerted effort to resolve this inherent dissonance, even if only temporarily, by providing a clearer self-other differentiation. However, the stark economic realities faced by the Maldives—including a high current account deficit, a significant debt burden, and a precipitous decline in tourism revenue (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b)—ultimately compelled a re-evaluation of this stance. This demonstrates that even deeply held ontological narratives and identity constructions are not immune to the compelling force of material exigencies, ultimately necessitating a pragmatic adjustment in foreign policy orientation.



## The Dialectic of Ontological Insecurity and Bilateral Recalibration: A Chronological Analysis

Fig. 3 India-Maldives Relations and Ontological Security



Timeline showing the evolution of India-Maldives bilateral relations with ontological security levels from 1965-2025

### Phase I: Benevolent Hegemon and Dependent Other (Pre-2013)

The initial decades of India-Maldives bilateral relations were largely characterized by a stable, routinized dynamic wherein India consistently affirmed its identity as a benevolent regional hegemon and "first responder," while the Maldives largely embraced its role as a recipient of Indian benevolence and security provision. This period established a foundational ontological trust that underpinned their interactions.

### Operation Cactus (1988): India's Ontological Affirmation as Regional Security Provider

India's swift and decisive military intervention during the 1988 coup attempt, codenamed Operation Cactus, stands as a seminal event in the bilateral relationship (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). This operation not only thwarted the coup but also unequivocally established India's credentials as the pre-eminent "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). A critical and often lauded aspect of this intervention was the immediate and complete withdrawal of Indian troops once their mission was accomplished. This deliberate act was crucial in assuaging any nascent Maldivian fears of Indian dominance or territorial ambitions, thereby fostering long-term trust and cementing friendly bilateral relations (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). This strategic restraint solidified India's *ātman* as a responsible and non-interfering regional power, reinforcing its self-narrative.

Operation Cactus was not merely a military success; it was a critical *routine-building* event that profoundly shaped the ontological landscape of the bilateral relationship. India's intervention established a predictable pattern of benevolent assistance, while the immediate withdrawal of troops served as a deliberate act of *ontological reassurance*. This prevented the emergence of *anxieties* within the Maldivian psyche regarding potential Indian territorial aspirations (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). This foundational act built a robust system of *basic trust* (Mitzen, 2006) that allowed the relationship to flourish for decades, simultaneously reinforcing India's self-narrative as a responsible regional power and bolstering the Maldives' sense of secure sovereignty.

## Humanitarian Interventions (2004 Tsunami, 2014 Water Crisis): Reinforcing the "First Responder" Narrative

Beyond military assistance, India consistently demonstrated its "first responder" ethos through crucial humanitarian interventions. Following the devastating 2004 Tsunami, India was the first country to dispatch relief and aid to the Maldives (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Similarly, during the acute drinking water crisis in Malé in December 2014, India provided rapid and comprehensive assistance, deploying heavy-lift transporters and naval ships equipped with desalination plants (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). These repeated interventions further reinforced India's "first responder" credentials, solidifying its perceived capacity and unwavering commitment to come to the Maldives' rescue in times of distress (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a).

These humanitarian crises provided invaluable opportunities for India to *perform* its "first responder" identity, thereby reinforcing its *autobiographical narrative* (Gellwitzki, 2025; Giddens, 1991) and solidifying its own *ontological security*. For the Maldives, receiving such prompt and effective aid consistently reinforced a predictable routine of reliance on India, which in turn contributed to its own sense of *stabilitas* in the face of existential threats. These repeated positive interactions fostered a robust *inter-subjective understanding* of their respective roles within the bilateral dyad, embedding a sense of mutual dependability.

## Developmental Assistance as Ontological Bonding: Infrastructure and Capacity Building

India's commitment to the Maldives extended significantly into long-term developmental assistance, which served as a powerful mechanism for ontological bonding. Major projects included the establishment and subsequent renovation of the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Newsonair, 2025), the Maldives Institute of Technical Education (MITE) (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Newsonair, 2025), the Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Newsonair, 2025), and the National College for Police and Law Enforcement (NCPL) (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; De, 2024). These initiatives, coupled with substantial Lines of Credit (LoCs) extended over the years (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Anadolu, 2025), formed a robust and enduring framework of cooperation, deeply embedding India in the socio-economic fabric of the Maldives.

India's developmental assistance transcends mere economic aid; it represents a profound *ontological investment*. By contributing directly to the foundational elements of Maldivian society—healthcare, education, and critical infrastructure—India effectively integrated itself into the Maldivian *self-narrative* as a fundamental and indispensable partner. This consistent engagement fostered a deeply embedded, habitual relationship (Mitzen, 2006) that cultivated mutual ontological security. The long-term nature and tangible impact of these projects reinforced the continuity and stability of the bilateral relationship, making India an intrinsic part of the Maldives' developmental trajectory and, by extension, its *ipseity*.

## Phase II: Identity Dissonance and Strategic Re-orientation (2013-2023)

This period marked a significant shift in the bilateral dynamic, characterized by increasing *ontological dissonance* within the Maldives. Maldivian political elites began to actively contest the established self-other relationship with India, a re-orientation largely instigated by domestic political transitions and the burgeoning influence of the People's Republic of China in the Indian Ocean Region.

## The Yameen Era and China's *Belt and Road Initiative*: Maldivian Identity Re-articulation and Ontological Strain with India

The presidency of Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018) witnessed a pronounced pivot in Maldivian foreign policy towards China. The Maldives formally joined China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2014, subsequently signing numerous agreements that facilitated substantial Chinese investment (Council on Foreign

Relations, 2024; Salih, 2023; Mohamed, 2025). China extended significant loans, reportedly totalling \$1.4 billion, and undertook major infrastructure projects, including the iconic China-Maldives Friendship Bridge and various social housing initiatives (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Salih, 2023). This burgeoning Chinese presence and influence were unequivocally perceived by India as a direct challenge to its traditional regional influence and strategic prerogatives in its immediate maritime neighbourhood (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Mohamed, 2025).

China's BRI offered the Maldives a compelling alternative *significant other* (Gellwitzki, 2025; Giddens, 1991) for its developmental narrative, thereby directly challenging the established routine of primary reliance on India. This presented Maldivian elites, particularly under President Yameen, with a strategic opportunity to *re-articulate* the nation's *ipseity* away from a perceived over-dependence on India. This re-scripting of identity, driven by new material opportunities and alternative partnerships, generated considerable *ontological strain* and *Anxieties* in the India-Maldives relationship, as India's long-established role and self-narrative as the primary partner were perceptibly undermined.

### **The Nasheed Arrest (2015) and its Affective Repercussions on Bilateral Trust**

The arrest of former President Mohamed Nasheed in February 2015 on contentious terror charges, and India's subsequent expression of profound concern, represented a significant nadir in the bilateral relationship. This incident was compounded by Indian Prime Minister Modi's decision to omit the Maldives from his multi-nation Indian Ocean tour in March 2015, a clear diplomatic snub that underscored the growing estrangement. The episode, along with Nasheed's earlier seeking of refuge in the Indian High Commission in 2013, became fertile ground for the propagation of anti-India rhetoric and the galvanization of nationalist sentiments within the Maldives (Shivamurthy, 2022).

The Nasheed incident exposed the inherent fragility of the established ontological trust between the two nations. It generated *ontological insecurity* for both sides: for India, it constituted a direct challenge to its diplomatic influence and the perceived legitimacy of its interventions in regional affairs; for the Maldives, it heightened a pervasive sense of *anxieties* regarding its *sovereignty* and the potential for external interference (Shivamurthy, 2022; Yadav, 2025). The politicization of Indian aid and defence cooperation, which had previously served as pillars of ontological bonding, further eroded the shared routines that had underpinned bilateral *stabilitas* for decades (Shivamurthy, 2022). This period underscored how seemingly internal political events could have profound, destabilizing ontological repercussions on interstate relations.

### **The "India Out" Campaign (2020-2023): A Crisis of Mutual Recognition and Ontological Rupture**

The "India Out" campaign escalated into a significant and enduring source of diplomatic friction, fundamentally challenging the established dynamics of the India-Maldives relationship (Naish, 2025; Shivamurthy, 2022; Sarma & Goswami, 2023; Jeelani, 2025; Samaranayake, 2023). Driven by persistent concerns over the presence of Indian military personnel and allegations of Indian interference in domestic affairs, the campaign represented a direct challenge to India's "Neighbourhood First" policy and its carefully cultivated identity as a benevolent and non-intrusive partner (Naish, 2025; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025a; Samaranayake, 2023; Yadav, 2025). For the Maldives, the campaign served as a powerful political platform to assert its *svatantratā* and to re-define its *ipseity* in a manner that emphasized autonomy and independence from perceived external influence (Samaranayake, 2023; Yadav, 2025).

Diplomatic row that erupted in January 2024, triggered by derogatory remarks made by Maldivian cabinet ministers against Prime Minister Modi, further exacerbated tensions, leading to a widespread "Boycott Maldives" trend in India and a precipitous decline in Indian tourist arrivals (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). This episode vividly illustrated the material consequences of ontological friction. The "India Out" campaign represents a profound *ontological rupture* within the bilateral relationship. It was a deliberate *discursive act* by a segment of Maldivian elites to construct India as a threatening "other," thereby providing a coherent, albeit negative, self-narrative for the Maldives. This act of "splitting" (Gellwitzki, 2025) the relationship into a binary of perceived oppressor and oppressed aligns with the Kleinian *paranoid-schizoid position*, generating acute *anxieties* for both nations as their established routines and mutual self-other understandings were severely

destabilized. The economic fallout, particularly the sharp decline in tourism (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024), provided tangible empirical evidence of the severe material consequences that can arise from such deep-seated ontological friction, compelling a re-evaluation of the prevailing narrative.

### Phase III: Pragmatic Re-equilibration and the Forging of a New Paradigm (2023-Present)

This most recent phase marks a deliberate and concerted effort by both India and the Maldives to manage the pervasive *anxieties* and repair the *ontological rupture* that characterized the preceding period. The trajectory has shifted towards a more pragmatic and mutually beneficial *modus vivendi*, signalling a conscious move away from zero-sum identity politics.

### The Muizzu Presidency: Navigating Domestic Identity Politics and Economic Realities

President Mohamed Muizzu, who ascended to power in November 2023 on the strength of his "India Out" campaign platform (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Samaranayake, 2023), initially signalled a clear preference for closer ties with China, even breaking with tradition by making Beijing his first foreign visit destination (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Jeelani, 2025). However, the stark economic realities confronting the Maldives—including a persistent high current account deficit, a burgeoning public debt burden (reaching 121% of GDP in Q1 2025), and a notable decline in the crucial tourism sector following diplomatic row (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b)—coupled with what was perceived as "underwhelming support from China" (Jeelani, 2025), compelled a pragmatic re-evaluation. This confluence of factors effectively nudged the Maldivian government to "separate politics from geopolitics" (Jeelani, 2025). President Muizzu's subsequent visit to India in October 2024, during which he publicly affirmed the prioritization of the relationship and pledged not to harm India's security interests, served as a significant signal of this strategic recalibration (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025c).

The economic *Anxieties* (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b) faced by the Maldives under the Muizzu administration functioned as a powerful *critical situation* (Gellwitzki, 2025) that profoundly disrupted the continuity of the "India Out" self-narrative. This material constraint compelled a pragmatic re-evaluation of the nation's *ipseity* and its external relational strategies, demonstrating that while ontological needs are deeply profound, they are not impervious to the compelling force of material exigencies, ultimately necessitating a pragmatic adjustment in foreign policy orientation. This shift indicates a movement from a rigid *paranoid-schizoid position* to a more flexible *depressive position* (Gellwitzki, 2025) in managing national anxiety, recognizing the inescapable necessity of interdependence for national *stabilitas*.

### India's Strategic Patience and Recalibrated Engagement: Debt Relief, LoC in INR, and Civilianization of Military Presence

Despite the pronounced provocations and the overt anti-India rhetoric of the "India Out" campaign, India consistently maintained a posture of strategic patience and continued engagement (Jeelani, 2025). A key demonstration of this recalibrated approach was India's positive response to President Muizzu's request for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel, opting instead to replace them with civilian technical personnel to operate essential aviation platforms (Naish, 2025; Jeelani, 2025). This move, while accommodating Maldivian sovereignty concerns, ensured the continuity of vital humanitarian and disaster response capabilities.

Further, India announced a fresh \$565 million Line of Credit (LoC), notably denominated in Indian Rupees (INR 4,850 crore), signalling a new era of financial cooperation (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; ChiniMandi, 2025; Livemint, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Anadolu, 2025). This was accompanied by a crucial agreement to reduce the Maldives' annual debt repayment burden by a significant 40% (Livemint, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; Times of India, 2025d). India also provided broader financial lifelines, including the rollover of Treasury Bills and offering currency swaps to bolster the Maldivian economy amidst its fiscal challenges (DD News, 2025; Jeelani, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024a).

India's response to the "India Out" campaign, characterized by "strategic patience" and "pragmatism" (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b), constituted a sophisticated act of *ontological repair*. By accommodating the troop



withdrawal (Naish, 2025; Jeelani, 2025) and offering substantial economic relief (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Livemint, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Anadolu, 2025), India demonstrated its unwavering commitment to its "Neighbourhood First" *ātman* while simultaneously addressing Maldivian *anxieties* about sovereignty. The INR-denominated LoC is both a symbolic and practical gesture of mutual respect, signalling a move towards a more equitable, less hierarchical *routine*, thereby fostering a *depressive position* (Gellwitzki, 2025) of mutual recognition and interdependence. This strategic accommodation allowed for the rebuilding of trust and the re-establishment of a stable relational dynamic.

## The "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership": A New *Modus Vivendi* for Ontological Coexistence

The formal launch of the "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership" represents a pivotal moment, signifying a conscious effort to forge a new chapter in India-Maldives relations (Al Jazeera, 2025; Jeelani, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; DD News, 2025). This framework underscores a shared commitment to a bilateral investment pact and the commencement of negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Livemint, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Times of India, 2025d; Anadolu, 2025). Further, the renewed emphasis on defence and security cooperation, exemplified by the inauguration of the new Maldivian Ministry of Defence building constructed with Indian assistance, and India's continued pledge to support Maldives' defence capabilities, highlights a shared vision for regional stability (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a). This partnership aims to strengthen maritime security through mechanisms like the Colombo Security Conclave (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

The "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership" represents a conscious effort to forge a new *modus vivendi* based on *ontological coexistence*. By focusing on shared goals such as peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indian Ocean Region (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a), and by deepening economic and security ties, both states are actively co-creating a new *self-other narrative* that emphasizes mutual benefit and respect. This strategic shift from reactive crisis management to proactive partnership building signifies a more mature and stable *ontological position*, where past differences are acknowledged but do not lead to *radical othering* (Yadav, 2025). Instead, the focus is on constructing a shared future that accommodates the *ipseities* of both nations.

## Navigating the *Anxieties* and Forging *Stabilitas*: Mechanisms of Ontological Repair

The recent recalibration in India-Maldives relations demonstrates a conscious effort to move beyond periods of *ontological dissonance* and *rupture* towards a more stable and predictable *modus vivendi*. This section explores the key mechanisms employed to achieve this *stabilitas*, focusing on the re-establishment of routines, the strategic role of economic interdependence, the deliberate management of diplomatic discourse, and the cultivation of people-to-people ties.

Fig. 4 Ontological Anxiety vs. Bilateral Engagement

	Low Ontological Anxiety (stable identity)	High Ontological Anxiety (identity threatened)
Cooperative Engagement	Stable cooperation, mutual trust, reinforcing identity routines (e.g., Operation Cactus 1988, Solih Era "India First")	Constructive engagement under stress, strategic patience, narrative reconciliation (e.g., post "India Out" adjustment, Muizzu pragmatic rapprochement)
Disruptive Engagement	Occasional tensions but fundamental trust intact (e.g., Yameen era challenges, democratic transitions)	Ontological rupture, identity threats, high anxiety, conflictual narratives (e.g., "India Out" campaign, troop withdrawals, major diplomatic rows)

## The Role of Routines and Reciprocity in Re-establishing Trust and Predictability

Routines constitute the very "daily life" of ontological security, providing the necessary continuity and order for a state's self-perception (Gellwitzki, 2025; Mitzen, 2006; Rix, 2021). The re-establishment and intensification of high-level exchanges and institutional mechanisms, such as Joint Commission Meetings and Defence Cooperation Dialogues, have been pivotal in rebuilding these essential routines (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). These regular interactions serve as a crucial antidote to the *Anxieties* generated by uncertainty, re-instilling a sense of predictability in bilateral engagements.

India's consistent provision of essential commodities to the Maldives, coupled with the renewal of annual quotas for these vital goods, further reinforces this predictability (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Jeelani, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Such actions are not merely transactional; they are *ritualistic performances* that signal a profound commitment to the relationship, thereby actively repairing the *ontological rupture* and reinforcing shared expectations of reliable partnership. These routinized acts of reciprocity contribute significantly to the restoration of bilateral *stabilitas*.

## Economic Interdependence as an Ontological Stabilizer: Trade, Tourism, and Financial Lifelines

Economic interdependence serves as a powerful *ontological stabilizer* in bilateral relations. The trade volume between India and the Maldives has demonstrated significant growth, crossing the \$300 million mark for the first time in 2021, exceeding \$500 million in 2022, and reaching \$548 million in 2023 (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; De, 2024). This surge is largely attributable to the operationalization of a dedicated cargo vessel service between the two nations and the commencement of various Lines of Credit (LoC) projects (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025). India's emergence as the Maldives' third-largest trading partner in 2021 underscores the deepening economic integration (De, 2024).

Tourism, as the economic backbone of the Maldives, is another critical dimension of this interdependence (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). India consistently remained the top source market for tourists to the Maldives from 2020 to 2023 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023). The "Boycott Maldives" trend that emerged in early 2024, following the diplomatic row, resulted in a significant and immediate drop in Indian tourist arrivals (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023). This sharp decline vividly highlighted the Maldives' economic vulnerability and underscored the urgent necessity for a diplomatic reset (Jeelani, 2025; Times of India, 2025b).

India's consistent financial assistance, including substantial currency swaps and the rollover of Treasury Bills, has been crucial in sustaining Maldivian economic stability amidst fiscal challenges (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Jeelani, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; Times of India, 2025d). The recent introduction of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and discussions on local currency settlement further deepen economic integration, facilitating seamless trade and tourism (DD News, 2025.; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c).

Economic interdependence, encompassing robust trade, a thriving tourism sector, and critical financial lifelines, acts as a powerful *ontological stabilizer*. When these economic routines are disrupted, as demonstrated by the tourism boycott, it generates acute *Anxieties* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024; Times of India, 2025b) that compels states to seek *reparative anxiety management* (Gellwitzki, 2025). The recent substantial financial assistance and renewed trade agreements are not solely about material gains; they are profound *ontological gestures* aimed at re-establishing the *predictability* and *continuity* (Gellwitzki, 2025; Giddens, 1991) essential for ontological security. The quantitative data on trade and tourism, presented in Table 4, empirically demonstrates the material stakes involved in maintaining a stable self-other relationship.

Table 4: India-Maldives Bilateral Trade Volume (USD Million) and Indian Tourist Arrivals (2019-2024)

Year	Total Bilateral Trade (USD Million)	Indian Tourist Arrivals to Maldives (Thousands)

2019	N/A (Data not aggregated for this year in snippets, but trade was below \$300M)	166.03 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)
2020	N/A (Data not aggregated for this year)	62.96 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)
2021	323.29 (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; De, 2024)	291.79 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)
2022	501.82 (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; De, 2024)	241.38 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)
2023	548 (DD News, 2025.; High Commission of India, Malé, 2025)	209.19 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)
2024	N/A (Recent LoC of \$565M announced in July 2025 for future projects, trade figures for full 2024 not yet available, but likely impacted by Jan 2024 row)	130.81 (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023)

*Note: Trade figures are generally for Jan-Dec period. Tourist arrivals for 2024 are as of end of year (Maldives Monetary Authority, 2023). The \$565 million LoC was announced in July 2025, denominated in INR (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; ChiniMandi, 2025; Livemint, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; PM India, 2025; Times of India, 2025c; Anadolu, 2025).*

### Diplomatic Discourse and Narrative Management: Re-framing Self-Other Relations

A critical component of ontological repair involves the deliberate management of diplomatic discourse and the conscious re-framing of self-other relations. Following the periods of *ontological rupture*, both India and the Maldives have engaged in strategic narrative management to stabilize the bilateral dyad. India, for instance, has consistently emphasized a "friendship first" ethos, portraying itself as the "most trusted friend" of the Maldives (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025a). This rhetoric aims to re-establish a benevolent self-narrative and counter perceptions of dominance.

Concurrently, the Muizzu government in the Maldives has taken steps to distance itself from the derogatory remarks made by its ministers in January 2024 (Times of India, 2025c), and has articulated a policy to "separate politics from geopolitics" (Jeelani, 2025). This signifies a pragmatic recognition that despite internal political currents, the fundamental geopolitical and economic realities necessitate a stable working relationship with India. The joint adoption of the "Vision for Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership" (DD News, 2025.; Ministry of External Affairs, 2025; Times of India, 2025c) stands as a key discursive act, providing a shared narrative framework for future cooperation.

Diplomatic discourse and narrative management are fundamentally *performative acts* (ResearchGate, n.d.-c) crucial for *ontological repair*. By consciously re-framing the relationship through shared visions and positive rhetoric, leaders endeavour to re-establish a common *inter-subjective understanding* (Yadav, 2025) of their respective *ātman* and their roles within the dyad. This process helps to mitigate past *anxieties* and construct a new, mutually acceptable *autobiographical narrative* for the bilateral relationship, moving away from antagonistic binaries towards a more integrated, cooperative self-other perception.

### Capacity Building and People-to-People Ties: Cultivating Shared Ontological Ground

Beyond high-level diplomacy and economic agreements, the cultivation of robust people-to-people ties and extensive capacity-building initiatives serves as a profound mechanism for fostering shared ontological ground. India continues to provide comprehensive training opportunities for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), meeting approximately 70% of their defence training requirements (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; De, 2024; Newsonair, 2025). Similarly, India offers extensive training programs for Maldivian civil

servants and local government representatives (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024a).

Projects in critical sectors such as education, health, and broader community development—including the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, the Maldives Institute of Technical Education, and various High Impact Community Development Projects—further embed India into the daily lives and professional development of Maldivians (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Newsonair, 2025; De, 2024). The significant presence of an Indian expatriate community in the Maldives, estimated at approximately 30,000 individuals, predominantly in the health and education sectors, along with the provision of visa-free entry for Indian nationals, further deepens these interpersonal linkages (High Commission of India, Malé, 2025; Ministry of External Affairs, 2024a).

People-to-people ties and capacity-building initiatives represent the *micro-foundations* of macro-level *ontological stabilitas*. They create shared experiences, foster mutual understanding, and cultivate a sense of commonality that can transcend periods of political *turbulentia*. By embedding India into the daily lives and professional development of Maldivians, these initiatives foster a deeper, more resilient form of *ontological bonding*. This makes the bilateral relationship more robust against future shocks and significantly reduces the likelihood of *radical othering* (Yadav, 2025), contributing to a more enduring and stable *inter-subjective understanding*.

## CONCLUSION

### The Enduring Quest For Ontological Security In The Indo-Maldivian *Res Publica*

#### Recapitulation of Ontological Dynamics and Trajectories

The intricate tapestry of India-Maldives bilateral relations, when unravelled through the theoretical lens of ontological security, reveals a profound interplay of selfhood, *anxieties*, and the perpetual quest for *stabilitas*. This analysis has demonstrated that the trajectory of this dyad is not solely a product of material interests or conventional geopolitical balancing, but is deeply imbued with the ontological imperatives of both states. India, driven by its self-perception as a benevolent regional hegemon and "first responder," seeks to maintain a consistent autobiographical narrative through routinized practices and relationships. The Maldives, a small island state navigating the complexities of state-building and external influence, constantly grapples with its *ipseity* and the assertion of its *svatantratā*.

The relationship has traversed distinct phases: an initial period of robust ontological trust, forged through India's decisive and restrained interventions (e.g., Operation Cactus) and consistent developmental assistance; a subsequent phase marked by profound *ontological dissonance* and *rupture*, exemplified by the Yameen era's pivot towards China and the highly charged "India Out" campaign; and a recent, deliberate phase of pragmatic *re-equilibration*. This latest phase signifies a conscious movement away from a rigid, *paranoid-schizoid* position of "splitting" the other into an antagonist, towards a more mature *depressive position* that allows for *reparative anxiety management* and the integration of complex realities.

#### Implications for Small State Agency and Regional Power Projection

The India-Maldives case offers profound insights into the agency of small states in navigating the intricate currents of great power competition. The shifts in Maldivian foreign policy, particularly during periods of *ontological strain*, were not merely reactive responses to external pressures but were deeply rooted in its contested *ipseity* and its inherent struggle to assert *svatantratā*. This demonstrates that even states with limited material power possess significant agency in constructing and re-articulating their national identity, thereby influencing their foreign policy choices.

For India, the experience underscores the inherent complexities and nuanced challenges of regional power projection. The "first responder" identity, while deeply ingrained and historically affirmed, requires continuous *ontological maintenance* and flexible adaptation to the evolving self-narratives and perceived *Anxieties* of its smaller neighbours. The recent period of *ontological rupture* served as a critical lesson, highlighting that even a



benevolent hegemon faces *ontological vulnerability* when its established self-narrative is challenged or rejected by a significant other.

The case vividly illustrates the reciprocal nature of ontological vulnerability. While small states like the Maldives are inherently more susceptible to *ontological insecurity* due to external geopolitical pressures and internal identity contestations, regional powers like India also experience *ontological vulnerability* when their established self-narratives—such as "first responder" or benevolent hegemon—are challenged or rejected by significant others. This dynamic underscores that ontological security is not a unilateral achievement but a continuous, *reciprocal*, and *inter-subjective* process, demanding mutual recognition and ongoing adaptation for the maintenance of *stabilitas*.

### Future Trajectories: Sustaining *Stabilitas* Amidst Geopolitical *Turbulentia*

The emergence of the "Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership" represents a conscious and concerted effort to institutionalize *ontological coexistence* within the India-Maldives dyad. This new paradigm, characterized by renewed economic cooperation, debt relief, and the civilianization of India's military presence, signals a commitment to a more balanced and mutually respectful relationship. However, this *stabilitas* is not a static endpoint but a dynamic *equilibrium* in the ongoing quest for ontological security.

The inherent *turbulentia* of geopolitical competition, particularly with China's continued strategic presence and economic engagement in the Indian Ocean, coupled with the persistent domestic political flux within the Maldives, means that this newfound *stabilitas* will necessitate continuous, conscious *reparative anxiety management* and flexible *routinization*. The emphasis on deepening economic interdependence, facilitating trade in local currencies, and fostering robust people-to-people ties suggests a deliberate strategy to embed the relationship at a deeper, more resilient *ontological* level. This approach aims to create a more robust *inter-subjective understanding* that can withstand future shocks.

The lessons gleaned from the periods of *ontological rupture* emphasize the critical need for proactive *anxiety management* and the continuous cultivation of *shared narratives* that can accommodate the distinct *ipseities* of both states. While future *turbulentia* will inevitably arise, the current *modus vivendi* provides a pragmatic framework for navigating these challenges through mutual recognition, strategic accommodation, and adaptive diplomacy. This trajectory suggests a movement towards a more mature *depressive position* in their bilateral *res publica*, where the complexities of interdependence are embraced, and the pursuit of individual selfhood is harmonized with the imperative of collective regional stability.

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