



## India-Maldives Relations

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This article is based on **“Strategic comfort’ with the Maldives”** which was published in The Hindu on 09/11/2020. It talks about the relations between India and Maldives.

Maldives holds strategic importance for India under the Modi government’s **‘Neighbourhood First’ policy** due to its location in the Indian Ocean. However, the relations between the two countries was strained under the pro-China regime of their former President Abdulla Yameen.

This can be reflected in the recent ‘India Out’ campaign led by Abdulla Yameen, against India’s massive developmental funding for creating physical, social and community infrastructure, and incumbent President Solih’s government retaining two India-gifted helicopters and their operational military personnel.

While India-Maldives relations have always been close, cordial and multi-dimensional, recent regime instability in the Maldives has posed some limitations, especially in the political & strategic arena . Therefore, the main challenge to India’s diplomacy is balancing out all these contradictions into harmonious relations.

### **Geo-Strategic Importance of Maldives to India**

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Despite being the smallest Asian country with a land area, Maldives is one of the world’s most geographically dispersed countries straddling a 960-km-long submarine ridge running north to south and which forms a wall in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Its strategic location defines the geo-strategic importance of Maldives far beyond its physical size, which can be reflected as the following:

- **Maldives, a Toll Gate in Indian Ocean:** Located at the southern and northern parts of this island chain lies the two important sea lanes of communication (SLOCs).
  - These SLOCs are critical for maritime trade flow between the Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia.
  - While the Indian Ocean is considered as the key highway for global trade and energy flow, Maldives virtually stands as a toll gate.
  - While SLOCs in the vicinity of the Maldives have broader strategic significance for global maritime trade, these are of vital importance for India since nearly 50% of India's external trade and 80% of her energy imports transit these westward SLOCs in the Arabian Sea.
- **Increasing Maritime Activity:** As maritime economic activity in the Indian Ocean has risen dramatically in recent decades, the geopolitical competition too in the Indian Ocean has intensified.
 

Due to this, China's strategic interests and logistical limitations in the Indian Ocean have prompted it to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean.
- **India's Strategic Priority:** A favourable and positive maritime environment in the Indian Ocean is essential for the fulfilment of India's Strategic priority.
  - Thus, India continuously aims at promoting an ever-expanding area of peace and stability around it.
  - In addition, Maldives is an important partner in India's role as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.

## Cooperation Between India & Maldives

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- **Security Cooperation:** Through the decades, India has rushed emergency assistance to the Maldives, whenever sought.
  - In 1988, when armed mercenaries attempted a coup against President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, India sent paratroopers and Navy vessels and restored the legitimate leadership under **Operation Cactus**.
  - Further, joint naval exercises have been conducted in the Indian ocean and India still contributes to the security of the maritime island.
- **Disaster Management:** The 2004 tsunami and the drinking water crisis in Male a decade later were other occasions when India rushed assistance.
  - At the peak of the continuing COVID-19 disruption, the Maldives has been the biggest beneficiary of the Covid-19 assistance given by India among its all of India's neighbouring countries.
  - When the world supply chains were blocked because of the pandemic, India continued to provide crucial commodities to the Maldives under **Mission SAGAR**.

- **People To People Contact:** Technology has made connectivity easier for everyday contact and exchanges. Maldivian students attend educational institutions in India and patients fly here for superspeciality healthcare, aided by a liberal visa-free regime extended by India.
- **Economic Cooperation:** Tourism is the mainstay of Maldivian economy. The country is now a major tourist destination for some Indians and a job destination for others.
  - Given the geographical limitations imposed on the Maldives, India has exempted the nation from export curbs on essential commodities.

## Irritants in Relations

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- **Political Instability:** India's major concern has been the impact of political instability in the neighbourhood on its security and development.
  - The February 2015 arrest of opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed on terrorism charges and the consequent political crisis have posed a real diplomatic test for India's neighbourhood policy.
- **Radicalisation:** In the past decade or so, the number of Maldivians drawn towards terrorist groups like the Islamic State (IS) and Pakistan-based madrassas and jihadist groups has been increasing.
  - Political instability and socio-economic uncertainty are the main drivers fuelling the rise of Islamist radicalism in the island nation.
  - Events in West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan have also influenced Maldivian radicalisation.
  - This gives rise to the possibility of Pakistan based terror groups using remote Maldivian islands as a launch pad for terror attacks against India and Indian interests.
  - Further, India's concern is regarding how radical Islamist forces have been gaining political influence in the neighbourhood.
- **China Angle:** China's strategic footprint in India's neighbourhood has increased. The Maldives has emerged as an important 'pearl' in China's **“String of Pearls”** construct in South Asia.
  - Given the Maldives's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, there are speculations about China trying to develop strategic bases in the archipelago.
  - Given the uncertain dynamics of Sino-Indian relation, China's potential strategic presence in Maldives remains a concern.
  - Also, the Maldives have started using the China card to bargain with India.

## Conclusion

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In accordance with the “Neighbourhood First” policy of the government, India remains a committed development partner for a stable, prosperous and peaceful Maldives. However, for adherence of strategic comfort in relations, Maldives on its part should abide by its India First’ policy.

## 10 REASONS WHY MALDIVES IS IMPORTANT FOR INDIA




- 1** Strategically located in the Indian Ocean, Maldives archipelago comprising 1,200 coral islands lies next to key shipping lanes which ensure uninterrupted energy supplies to countries like China, Japan and India
- 2** Since China started to send naval ships to Indian Ocean roughly 10 years ago –and right up to Gulf of Aden in the name of anti-piracy operations – Maldives’ significance has steadily grown and now it’s at the heart of international geopolitics
- 3** As the pre-eminent South Asian power and a ‘net security provider’ in the Indian Ocean region, India needs to cooperate with Maldives in security and defence sectors
- 4** China’s massive economic presence in Maldives is a major concern for India. With the country now said to owe 70% of its external aid to China, many believe that Yameen has done to Maldives what Rajapaksa did to Sri Lanka. India had to push back at some stage and the current political crisis might just have offered India the right opportunity
- 5** A large section of population which supports the opposition parties like Nasheed’s MDP wants India to act against Yameen
- 6** Maldives is also a member of Saarc. It is important for India to have Maldives on board to maintain its leadership in the region. Maldives was the only Saarc country which seemed reluctant to follow India’s call for boycott of Saarc summit in Pakistan after the Uri attack
- 7** Under Yameen, radicalisation grew rapidly and it was often said that archipelago accounted for one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters in Syria in terms of per capita. India can ill-afford a neighbour which fails to check Islamic radicalisation
- 8** India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links. India was among the first to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965 and later established its mission at Malé in 1972
- 9** There are 25,000 Indian nationals living in Maldives (second largest expatriate community). Indian tourists also account for close to 6% of tourists Maldives receives every year
- 10** India is also a preferred destination for Maldivians for education, medical treatment, recreation and business. According to MEA, more and more Maldivians are seeking long term visa for pursuing higher studies/ medical treatment in India

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

Maldives holds strategic importance for India under ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy due to its location in the Indian Ocean. Discuss.

This editorial is based on **“No fireworks: On NGT ban on sale and use of firecrackers”** which was published in The Hindu on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.