



India-Maldives Ties: The China Concern

This editorial is based on [“India and Maldives ties: Despite China, bound by history and geography”](#) which was published in The Indian Express on 14/10/2023. It talks about how Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific affects India-Maldives relations.

For Prelims: [Maldives](#), [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), [Indian-Ocean](#), [China](#), [Greater Male Connectivity Project](#).

For Mains: Strategic Importance of Maldives for India, Chinese impact on India- Maldives relation

The relationship between India and Maldives has always been deeply rooted in history and geography. As India's closest neighbor, Maldives has relied on India for essential support and assistance throughout the years. However, with China's growing presence in the region, the dynamics of this relationship have become more complex. It is crucial to understand these dynamics to ensure that the long-standing bond between India and Maldives remains strong amidst evolving geopolitical circumstances.

How have India- Maldives Relations Evolved?

- **Centuries of Cultural and Historical Ties:**
 - The historical connections between India and the Maldives date back centuries. **In the 12th century, Islam replaced Buddhism** as the dominant religion in the Maldives, marking a significant cultural shift.
 - Even during the British protectorate years from 1887 to 1965, the **Maldives relied on India for essential goods and communication** with the outside world.
- **Geographical Destiny:**
 - The Maldives comprises over **1,200 islands scattered across 90,000 square kilometers**, with nearly 99.6% of its territory submerged in the sea.
 - Experts predict that, by 2050, approximately **80% of the Maldives is expected to vanish due to the phenomenon of "Global Boiling."** Given India's proximity, its role is pivotal in the context of the Maldives' fight against climate change.

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▪ Security Partnership:

- Defense cooperation extends to the areas of **Joint Exercises** - "[Ekuverin](#)", "**Dosti**", "**Ekatha**" and "**Operation Shield**".
- India provides the largest number of training opportunities for Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), meeting around **70% of their defense training requirements**.
- **Operation Cactus 1988**: Under Operation Cactus the Indian Armed Forces have helped the government of Maldives in the **neutralization of the coup attempt**.
- **Countering Maritime Threats**: India plays a critical role as the **Maldives' first line of defense against maritime threats**. This includes counterterrorism efforts, **combating piracy** on the high seas, **countering drug trafficking**, and addressing narcotics-related issues.

▪ Rehabilitation Centre:

- Signing of contract for the **Addu reclamation and shore protection project**.
- **A drug detoxification and rehabilitation centre** in Addu built with Indian assistance.
- The centre is **one of 20 high impact community development projects** being implemented by India in areas such as healthcare, education, fisheries, tourism, sports and culture.

▪ 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.
- In August 2022, an Indian company, signed a contract for the largest-ever infrastructure project in Maldives which is the **[Greater Male Connectivity Project \(GMCP\)](#)**.
- India emerged as **Maldives' 3rd largest trade partner in 2021**.
- **A Bilateral USD Currency Swap Agreement between RBI and Maldives Monetary Authority** was signed in 2019.
- The India-Maldives relationship suffered a setback when Maldives entered into a **Free-Trade Agreement (FTA) with China** in 2017.

▪ Infrastructure Projects:

- **Hanimaadhoo International Airport Development project** under an Indian credit line will add a brand-new terminal to cater to 1.3 million passengers a year.
- In 2022, the **National College for Policing and Law Enforcement (NCPLE)** was **inaugurated by India's External Affairs Minister**.
 - NCPLE is the **largest grant project executed by India** in Maldives.

▪ Greater Male Connectivity Project:

- It will consist of a 6.74 km-long bridge and causeway **link between Male and nearby islands of Villingli, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi**. It will use **renewable energy**.
- The project is funded by a **grant of USD 100 million and a Line of Credit (LOC) of USD 400 million from India**.
- It is not only the biggest project India is doing in the Maldives but also the **biggest infrastructure project in the Maldives overall**.
- **Relief Assistance:**
 - **Operation Neer 2014:** Under Operation Neer India supplied **drinking water to Maldives** to deal with the drinking water crisis.
 - **Operation Sanjeevani:** India supplied **6.2 tonnes of essential medicines to Maldives**, under Operation Sanjeevani as assistance in the fight against Covid-19.

What are the Concerns Related to China's role in Maldives?

- **China's Expanding Influence:**
 - China's presence in the Maldives is a cause for concern, as it primarily serves its own interests. China's economic engagement, often driven by **debt financing**, has led to **concerns about debt traps** and the resulting influence that China wields in the region.
 - Maldives have massive Chinese investment and became a participant in China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**. China funded and built various projects in Maldives, including the development of ports, airports, bridges, and other critical infrastructure as part of the **"String of the Pearls"** initiative.
- **China's Hegemonic Ambitions:**
 - China's ambitions to establish hegemony in the **Indian Ocean region** pose a potential threat to the development of a vibrant democracy in the Maldives.
 - The **pro-China stance of the new President elect of Maldives** created apprehensions in India about China's growing influence in its immediate neighborhood and the potential strategic implications.
- **India's Security Concerns:**
 - India has expressed concerns about **China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region**, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Maldives. The **development of Chinese-controlled ports and military facilities** in these areas has been seen as a challenge to India's strategic interests and regional security.
- **India's Countermeasures:**
 - India has responded by **intensifying its diplomatic and strategic engagement with Maldives and other Indian Ocean nations**. It has provided economic assistance, undertaken infrastructure projects, and expanded defense cooperation to strengthen its influence in the region.
 - India's **"Neighborhood First" policy** aims to counterbalance China's increasing presence.

What is the Perspective of India in Their Relationship with Maldives?

- India has consistently demonstrated its **commitment to building strong relations with the Maldives**. Its focus on comprehensive cooperation, security, infrastructure development, and daily essential support reflects its dedication to the partnership.
- While **challenges, such as the 'India out campaign'** and the **pro-China** policy have remained, India remains resolute in maintaining its relationship with the Maldives.
- India sees Maldives as an important part of its **'SAGAR Policy'** to ensure security and growth for all in the region.
- For India, Maldives is a **first line of defence against terrorism, piracy on the high seas, drug trafficking, narcotics, and other maritime crime**.
 - On the other hand, China's entry into Maldives is solely to advance its own interests.

What can be the Way Ahead in India-Maldives Relations?

- **Opportunities for India:**
 - India should act wisely in the midst of these changes. The incoming government in the Maldives is likely to prioritize its national interests, and India should emphasize a

development-oriented approach.

- The Maldives is grappling with a pressing issue of high youth unemployment, and projects aimed at enhancing youth employability are crucial.
 - **India's [High Impact Community Development Project \(HICDP\)](#) should focus on **creating employment opportunities** for the youth.**
- **Infrastructure Development:**
 - India's significant infrastructure project in the Maldives, **the Greater Male Connectivity Project**, supported by grants and a substantial **Line of Credit**, surpasses China's Sinamale Bridge Connectivity Project. India must **prioritize the project's early completion** to strengthen its influence.
- **Balanced Relations with India and China:**
 - As the Maldives concludes its elections, it is expected to strive for a **balanced relationship between India and China**. This approach is **vital to maximize the Maldives' developmental gains**.
 - Practical governance considerations, coupled with the realization of the **potential repercussions of undermining relations with India**, may guide future actions. It is crucial for both nations to uphold the historical ties and prioritize the larger interests of the Maldivian people.
- **Efforts to Strengthen Indo-Pacific Security Space:**
 - India must play a key role within Indo-Pacific security space **to ensure regional security in South Asia** and surrounding maritime boundaries.
 - The Indo-Pacific security space has been developed as a response to the growth of extra-regional powers (particularly China's) in India's maritime sphere of influence.

Conclusion

The enduring India-Maldives relationship, shaped by geography, culture, and shared values, offers a model for resilient partnerships in the face of external challenges. The Maldives' security, development, and prosperity are intricately linked to the continued support and collaboration with India. The potential for a bright future lies in recognizing the significance of historical bonds and the need to protect them. As the saying goes, "those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Drishti Mains Question:

The India-Maldives relationship has historical and geographical roots, but China's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific region raises concerns. Analyze the strategic importance of Maldives for India and discuss the impact of China on India-Maldives relations.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q. What do you understand by 'The String of Pearls'? How does it impact India? Briefly outline the steps taken by India to counter this. **(2013)**

Q. Discuss the political developments in the Maldives in the last two years. Should they be of any cause for concern to India? **(2013)**