



## Strengthening India-Maldives Defence Cooperation

**For Prelims:** [SAGAR](#), [Coastal radar system](#), [Ekuverin](#), [Ekatha](#), [Dosti](#), [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation](#), [Gulf of Aden](#), [Strait of Hormuz](#), [Belt and Road Initiative](#), [Great Male Connectivity Project](#)

**For Mains:** India's Foreign Policy and Security, India's Strategic Initiatives in the Indian Ocean, Major Aspects of India and Maldives Relations

**Source:** [TH](#)

### Why in News?

India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, during talks with the Maldivian Defence Minister, reaffirmed **India's commitment to enhancing the Maldives' defence** capabilities by providing defence equipment and platforms.

- This move reflects India's **"Neighborhood First" policy** and strengthening bilateral security and defence cooperation between the two nations.

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## How are India-Maldives Defence Cooperation?

- **Historical Context:** India has been a key defense partner of the Maldives, **often acting as the first responder in times of crisis**. This was demonstrated by [Operation Cactus in 1988](#), where India intervened to prevent a coup attempt in the Maldives, and during the [2004 tsunami](#).
  - The "**Neighborhood First**" policy and [SAGAR \(Security and Growth for All in the Region\)](#) vision underline India's proactive approach to fostering regional security.
- **Defence Projects:** India has played a key role in infrastructure projects like the **Composite Training Centre (CTC) for Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF)** and the construction of the **Coast Guard "Ektha" MNDF Harbour** and repair facility at **Sifavaru in Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) atoll**.
  - In October 2023, India announced the free refit of the **Maldivian Coast Guard Ship Huravee**, signifying mutual trust.
  - India has handed over a [coastal radar system to the Maldives](#), comprising 10 radar stations built with a USD 15.8 million Indian grant.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** India provides about **70% of the MNDF training needs**, with over **1,500 MNDF personnel trained** in various Indian defence academies.
  - Key bilateral exercises like "[Ekuverin](#)" and "[Ekatha](#)," along with trilateral exercises such as "[Dosti \(including India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives\)](#)" are conducted to enhance operational synergy and interoperability.
- **Institutional Mechanisms:** The [Annual Defence Cooperation Dialogue \(DCD\)](#) was initiated in 2016 at the **Defence Secretary level** to discuss and review defence cooperation.
  - The **5<sup>th</sup> Defence Cooperation Dialogue (DCD)** between India and the Maldives was held in New Delhi in September 2024.

## India-Maldives Bilateral Relations

- **Political Relations:** India was one of the first countries to recognize the Maldives post-independence in 1965 and established its **diplomatic mission in Malé in 1972**.
  - They are founding members of [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation \(SAARC\)](#) and signatories to the [South Asian Free Trade Area \(SAFTA\)](#).
- **Trade and Economy:** India and Maldives signed a trade agreement in 1981, boosting bilateral trade.
  - In 2024, India extended **USD 400 million in support** and a **bilateral currency swap of Rs 3,000 crore to the Maldives**, reinforcing its economic assistance. Additionally, the **State Bank of India rolled over USD 100 million of Treasury Bills for the Maldives**.
  - India became the **Maldives' 2nd largest trade partner in 2022 and the largest in 2023**.
  - Indian imports mainly include **scrap metals**, while exports cover engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, cement, and agricultural products.
  - **Visa-free entry for Indian business travelers in 2022** further enhanced commercial relations.
  - In 2024, India and the Maldives have finalized a **framework to promote the use of local currencies** for cross-border trade.
- **Tourism: Tourism is crucial to the Maldivian economy**, contributing about a quarter of GDP and nearly **70% of total employment (direct and indirect)**.
  - India became the **largest source of tourists to the Maldives**, with Indians leading tourism contributions for three consecutive years (2020, 2021, and 2022).
  - In March 2022, **India and Maldives agreed to an open skies arrangement** to enhance connectivity between the two countries.

## What is the Significance of India-Maldives Cooperation?

- **Geographical Significance:** The Maldives sits at a critical position in the Indian Ocean, acting as a "toll gate" between the western chokepoints ([Gulf of Aden](#) and [Strait of Hormuz](#)) and the eastern chokepoint ([Strait of Malacca](#)).
  - This proximity to major international shipping lanes makes it a crucial partner for India, as around **50% of its external trade and 80% of its energy imports transit through these routes**.
  - The Maldives, located south of India, is crucial for **monitoring maritime traffic and enhancing regional security**.
- **Economic and Social Benefits:** India is a key supplier of essential goods like rice, medicines, and infrastructure materials.
  - [India's Operation Neer](#) delivered around 2000 tonnes of water via [INS Deepak](#) and [INS Shukanya](#), during the **2014 Male Water Crisis**.
  - India's aid during crises, such as **tsunamis and Covid-19**, has reinforced its role as a reliable partner.
- **Countering External Influence:** India's cooperation with the Maldives **counterbalances the growing influence of external powers**, particularly China, in the region, and strengthens India's leadership role in maintaining regional peace.

## What are the Challenges in India-Maldives Defence Ties?

- **Geopolitical Rivalries:** China's growing influence through initiatives like the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#) and the ['String of Pearls'](#) raises concerns for India.
  - Chinese investments in Maldivian infrastructure, such as the **Sinamale Bridge**, and military agreements challenge India's strategic dominance in the region.
- **Internal Political Changes:** The ["India Out" campaign](#) in 2023 highlighted rising anti-Indian sentiments in the Maldives, with demands for the **withdrawal of Indian military personnel** and the halting of Indian infrastructural developments.
  - These shifts in Maldivian political leadership have impacted defense priorities and foreign policy alignment with India.

- **Security Threat:** The increasing presence of **radical Islamist groups, including Pakistan-backed jihadi** factions and **ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)**, in the Maldives poses a direct security threat to India, as these groups may use the Maldives as a base to target Indian assets.

## Way Forward

- **Multilateral Collaboration:** Encouraging Maldives' participation in regional frameworks like the **Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)**.
  - Strengthening **trilateral cooperation between India, Maldives, and Sri Lanka** for enhanced maritime security.
- **Infrastructure Projects:** India should prioritize and expedite the completion of crucial infrastructure projects, such as the **Great Male Connectivity Project**, to offer viable alternatives to Chinese investments.
- **People-Centric Initiatives:** Promoting **goodwill by focusing on civil-military projects**, such as **medical aid and community infrastructure development**.
  - Fostering cultural and educational exchanges between the two nations to strengthen public diplomacy.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

Discuss the significance of India-Maldives defence cooperation in the context of regional security in the Indian Ocean?

## **UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)**

### **Mains**

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

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