



## 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 in Indian Ocean to contain China's anti-India posturing.

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

### Why in News?

[Maldives](#), located to the south of India, in the [Indian Ocean](#), saw the election of a Pro-China candidate as the next president of the nation, which allegedly raises concern for India in recent times.

- Historically, Maldives had an Executive Presidency system since 1968, transitioning to a multi-party democracy in 2008. **No incumbent president has been re-elected since then**, which is concerning for India this time.



### Note

Maldives' electoral system is similar to France, where the winner has to secure more than 50% of votes. If no one crosses the mark in the first round, in the second round, the top two candidates go head to head.

## How has India's Relations with Maldives been?

- **Security Partnership:**
  - Defense cooperation extends to the areas of Joint Exercises - "[Ekuverin](#)", "Dosti", "Ekatha" and "Operation Shield" (begun in 2021).
  - India provides the largest number of **training opportunities for Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF)**, meeting around 70% of their defense training requirements.
- **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 2021, **Afcons, 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 on 22nd July 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 (NCPL) was inaugurated by India's External Affairs Minister.
    - NCPL 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.

## Different Operations in Maldives

- **Operation Cactus 1988:** Under **Operation Cactus** the Indian Armed Forces have helped the government of Maldives in the neutralization of the coup attempt.
- **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 is the Issue of China in India-Maldives Relations?

- **Chinese Infrastructure Investments:**
  - Maldives, like many other countries in the Indian Ocean region, has been a recipient of

Chinese infrastructure investments.

- 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.
- **Shift in Alliances:**
  - The pro-China stance led to a shift in Maldives' traditional foreign policy, which had typically been closer to India. This shift created apprehensions in India about China's growing influence in its immediate neighborhood and the potential strategic implications.
- **India's 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.
- **Political Developments:**
  - With the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in 2018, who is seen as more inclined towards India, **there has been a shift in Maldives' foreign policy back towards India**. Solih's government has sought to balance relations between India and China while maintaining traditional ties with India.
- **Strategic Importance:**
  - Maldives' strategic location in the Indian Ocean, along key maritime routes, continues to make it strategically significant for both India and China. As a result, both countries are likely to closely monitor developments in Maldives and vie for influence in these regions.

## Geography of Maldives

- **Maldives, a Toll Gate in the 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**.
- **Physical geography primarily consists of [Coral Reefs](#) and [Atolls](#)** and most of the area is under **Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)**
- Maldives primarily consists of an archipelago of low lying islands, which has been threatened due to rising sea rise.
- **Eight Degree Channel** separates Indian Minicoy (part of Lakshadweep Islands) from that of Maldives.

## Way Forward

- 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.
- At present, the **'India Out' campaign has support from a limited population** but this cannot be taken for granted by the Indian government.
  - If the **issues raised by the supporters of the 'India Out' are not handled carefully**, the domestic political situation in the Maldives may set ripples in India's currently favorable relationship with the country.
- India should adopt an accommodative stance in keeping with its age old tradition of promoting multi-polar and rule-based world order with respect to its neighbors.

- **Project Mausam** should provide sufficient space for Maldives to get benefits out of it and boost its economic and infrastructural reliance on India.

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

### Prelims

**Q. Which one of the following pairs of islands is separated from each other by the 'Ten Degree Channel'? (2014)**

- (a) Andaman and Nicobar
- (b) Nicobar and Sumatra
- (c) Maldives and Lakshadweep
- (d) Sumatra and Java

**Ans: (a)**

### Mains:

**Q 1.** 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 2.** 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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