



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 **5th 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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