



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS

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Introduction

India and the Maldives share deep-rooted historical, cultural, linguistic, and trade linkages, reinforced by geographical proximity and civilizational ties. Situated barely 70 nautical miles from Minicoy (Lakshadweep) and 300 nautical miles from India's western coast, the Maldives occupies a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This makes the bilateral partnership vital not only for India's "Neighbourhood First" policy but also for its broader SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and Indo-Pacific vision.

Over the decades, relations have matured into a comprehensive engagement covering defense, economic development, climate resilience, people-to-people contacts, and multilateral cooperation, with India often playing the role of a trusted first responder in times of crisis.

Importance of India–Maldives Relations.

1. Geostrategic Location

The Maldives lies astride key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean through which nearly 80% of global trade by volume and 60% of global oil trade passes.

Control and stability here is vital for India's maritime security and Indo-Pacific strategy.

2. Maritime Security Cooperation

India provides patrol vessels, training, and coastal surveillance systems to strengthen Maldivian maritime capabilities.

Recently in May 2023, India gifted a fast patrol vessel to enhance the Maldives National Defence Force's (MNDF) capacity.

3. Defense and Strategic Partnership

Operation Cactus (1988) showcased India's role as Maldives' security guarantor.

India operates Dornier aircraft and helicopters for search-and-rescue (SAR) and humanitarian missions in Maldives.

Despite current debates on withdrawal of Indian personnel (2024–25), both nations maintain defense ties.

4. Disaster Relief and First Responder Role

India has consistently acted as a first responder during crises—2004 tsunami, 2014 water crisis (Operation Neer), and COVID-19 (Vaccine Maitri supplies).

During COVID-19 (2020–21), India sent vaccines, food, and medical supplies as part of its "Neighbourhood First" policy.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477** / Whatsapp : **09710729833**

5.Economic and Development Partnership

India is among the largest development partners of Maldives with credit lines worth over USD 1.4 billion for infrastructure, housing, ports, and road projects.

Example: Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP), financed by India, is Maldives' largest-ever infrastructure project.

6.Tourism and People-to-People Ties

India is one of the largest sources of tourists to Maldives.

Air connectivity through direct flights from Indian metros has strengthened economic and cultural linkages.

7.Energy and Climate Cooperation

Maldives, as a climate-vulnerable island nation, collaborates with India on renewable energy, coastal protection, and climate resilience projects.

India has pledged support for solar energy projects under the International Solar Alliance (ISA).

8.Trade and Investment

Bilateral trade has been rising, with India exporting essential goods like foodgrains, medicines, and construction material.

Indian companies are involved in IT, healthcare, and infrastructure sectors in Maldives.

9.Regional and Multilateral Cooperation

Both countries cooperate in SAARC, IORA, and Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), focusing on counterterrorism, cyber security, and maritime safety.

Maldives supports India's role in global forums like UNSC reform.

Challenges in India–Maldives Relations

1.Political Instability in Maldives

Frequent political shifts in Malé directly affect ties with India.

Example: The 2023 election of President Mohamed Muizzubrought a strong “India Out” campaign, questioning India's military presence.

2.India Out Campaign & Public Perception

Sections of Maldivian politics portray India's defense cooperation as interference.

The “India Out” movement (2021–23) accused India of undermining sovereignty, gaining momentum during the 2023 elections.

3.Presence of Indian Military Personnel

Deployment of Indian aircraft and personnel for humanitarian and surveillance purposes faced domestic opposition.

In May 2024, India withdrew some defense personnel after Maldivian government requests, replacing them with civilians.

4.China's Expanding Footprint

Maldives' engagement with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) challenges India's influence.

Example: In Jan 2024, Muizzvisited Beijing, signing deals on infrastructure and trade, raising concerns in New Delhi.

5.Maritime Rivalries & Security Concerns

Maldives' strategic location makes it a theater for great-power competition.

India fears that growing Chinese naval access could weaken its maritime security in the IOR.

6.Economic Dependence & Debt Diplomacy

Maldives faces heavy debt to China (~30% of its external debt), limiting room for independent policy and making Indian projects politically contentious.

7.Fisheries Disputes

Traditional fishing rights and overfishing concerns occasionally create friction between Indian and Maldivian fishermen.

Example: Reports in 2024 of Maldivian fishermen opposing Indian trawlers entering EEZ waters.

8.Radicalization & Terrorism

Maldives has one of the highest per-capita numbers of foreign fighters in West Asia. Rising radicalization threatens India's security in Lakshadweep and coastal states.

9.Tourism Politics

India is a major source of tourists, but diplomatic strains impact arrivals.

Example: After anti-India remarks by Maldivian ministers in Jan 2024, many Indians boycotted Maldives tourism, reducing arrivals.

10.Balancing Sovereignty vs. Development Assistance

While India provides lines of credit, grants, and infrastructure projects, some Maldivians view these as eroding autonomy.

Example: Domestic debates over the Greater Malé Connectivity Project funded by India highlight sovereignty concerns.

How to strengthen India-maldives relations

1.Strengthen People-to-People Engagement

Promote cultural exchanges, scholarships, medical tourism, and student exchanges to counter anti-India narratives.

Example: India can expand ICCR scholarships and medical facilities access for Maldivian citizens.

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2.Recalibrate Defense Cooperation with Transparency

Instead of permanent military presence, India can provide training, capacity-building, and joint exercises.

Example: The replacement of Indian defense personnel with civilians in 2024 should be projected as respect for Maldivian sovereignty.

3.Accelerate Infrastructure & Development Projects

Speedy completion of flagship projects like the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP) will showcase India as a reliable partner.

Ensure timely delivery of credit-funded projects to avoid comparisons with China's fast-track construction model.

4.Enhance Maritime Cooperation

Strengthen Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) for joint patrols, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism in the Indian Ocean.

Example: Increase use of Indian-donated patrol vessels and coastal radar stations for shared security.

5.Balance Geopolitics with Sensitivity to Sovereignty

Frame initiatives as partnerships, not patronage to avoid fueling "India Out" sentiments.

Encourage joint ownership of projects with Maldivian stakeholders.

6.Diversify Economic Ties Beyond Aid

Encourage Indian private sector investment in IT, fintech, renewable energy, and fisheries.

Example: Expanding RuPay and UPI payment systems can ease financial transactions and reduce reliance on USD.

7.Tourism Cooperation & Connectivity

Promote joint tourism circuits (e.g., Maldives–Lakshadweep packages) and improve air connectivity.

Example: The decline in Indian arrivals in 2024 shows the need for depoliticizing tourism.

8.Climate & Blue Economy Partnership

Collaborate on climate adaptation, coastal protection, and renewable energy.

Example: India can assist Maldives in solar mini-grids and climate-resilient infrastructure under ISA.

9.Countering Radicalization Together

Enhance cooperation in cyber security, counterterrorism, and intelligence sharing to address extremism.

Joint rehabilitation programs for radicalized youth could be initiated.

10.Diplomatic Dialogue & Regular High-Level Visits

Institutionalize annual bilateral summits and strengthen Track-II diplomacy to keep communication open despite leadership changes.

Example: India's balanced approach after Muizzu's pro-China tilt in 2024 reflects the need for calibrated diplomacy.

Conclusion

India–Maldives relations, anchored in geography and history, remain vital for regional peace and India's maritime strategy. While political shifts and external influences pose challenges, India's approach must be guided by mutual trust, respect for sovereignty, and people-centric cooperation. A balanced engagement that combines strategic patience with developmental partnership will ensure that the Maldives continues to be a reliable maritime neighbor and a key pillar in India's "Neighbourhood First" and SAGAR vision.