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Maldives Coast Guard Harbour project

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Why in News: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Maldivian counterpart, Mariya Didi recently laid the foundation stone for the Coast Guard 'Ekatha Harbour' at Sifavaru in Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) atoll

About UTF Project

The UTF project was announced during External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit in February 2021.

It is among the biggest Indian grant-in-aid projects in the Maldives.

It is aimed at developing a maintenance and repair hub for naval vessels and will help the Maldives become self-sufficient.

Importance of the Project

The project marked a major step in the growing defence cooperation between India and Maldives.

In 2021, when Jaishankar and Didi had signed the agreement to "develop, support and maintain" the Coast Guard harbour in UTF atoll, the foreign minister had said that the facility will strengthen the capability of the Maldivian Coast Guard and facilitate regional humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

The Coast Guard of Maldives is the armed maritime force of the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF).

Earlier this year, Maldivian foreign minister Abdulla Shahid had said in an interview that the development of this naval facility will help Maldives stop sending vessels abroad for maintenance while boosting its maritime security capabilities.

He had said that the project, for which work was underway, is aimed at developing a maintenance and repair hub for naval vessels and that Maldivian personnel might also be trained as part of the project.

As per officials, platforms gifted to Maldives earlier often were brought to India for repairs but the project will make the country self-sufficient.

Why did the project invite controversy in the Maldives?

Since the announcement of the project in 2021, there have been allegations that it was a cover for the Indian military presence in Maldives.

This led to an "India Out" campaign in the island nation backed by its opposition leader Abdulla Yameen. Maldives President Ibrahim Solih last year banned anti-India protests as a threat to national security.

Anti-India campaigners in Maldives had also alleged that Indian troops were stationed in a fast patrol vessel India recently gifted to Maldives Coast Guard, which was commissioned as CGS Huravee earlier this week—a claim refuted by Didi who said that the Indian crew was on the ship in Male only for training purposes, and that it would have only Maldivian personnel henceforth.

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Importance of Maldives to India

India has had long-standing ties with the Maldives. In 1988, India helped the Maldives thwart a coup attempt backed by a Sri Lankan militant organisation.

The strategic location of Maldives in the Indian Ocean makes it important for India and that is the reason India has been working to boost ties with the country, especially in matters of defence and security.

The island nation lies close to India's exclusive economic zone and is in a place from where it can oversee maritime trade emanating from major choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz, Red Sea to Suez Canal and Mozambique.

Officials said having a friendly and independent Maldives is thus beneficial to India and other nations in the region with common maritime interests, particularly in the backdrop of growing Chinese attempts to expand its influence in the region.

Defence cooperation and other projects

In 2020, India had gifted a Dornier aircraft to the Maldives and in 2019 handed over a patrol vessel. Last year, New Delhi had also given a coastal radar system to Male.

Last year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India will provide 24 vehicles and a naval boat and will build police facilities on 61 islands of the country.

A recent joint statement released by India and Maldives released after Defence Minister Singh's visit to the country highlighted ongoing defence cooperation between the two neighbours, including joint exercises and exchanges of visits by military officials.

It also highlighted the importance of sharing best practices and expertise in areas such as counterterrorism, disaster management, cyber security and maritime security.

The countries have also agreed to explore additional avenues for cooperation, including in areas of defence trade, capacity building and joint exercises.

The handing over of these vessels is in line with India's vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), which seeks to work together with and jointly develop the capabilities of friends and partners for a safe, secure, prosperous and stable Indian Ocean Region, the joint statement had said.

Both countries are working closely to address challenges, including those on maritime security, terrorism, radicalisation, piracy, trafficking, organised crime and natural disasters.