

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

Maldives's 'India out' Plan

www.nextias.com

MALDIVES'S 'INDIA OUT' PLAN

In Context

- Mohamed Muizzu has opted for an 'India-out' policy by choosing Turkey as his first foreign destination which is seen as significant swings in foreign policy of Maldives.

Turkey's relationship with the Maldives:

Turkey has tried to raise its profile in south Asia, particularly in Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

It has intervened on matters of crucial interest to India, such as Kashmir by pushing a pan-Islamic foreign policy.

Steps taken by Maldives after Muizzu came into Power

- Mohamed Muizzu **chose Turkey** for **his first official visit** after assuming the office of President of Maldives.
 - ◆ He didn't come to India after assuming office as his first foreign destination, unlike past Maldivian Presidents.
- The **Maldives did not participate** in a meeting of the **NSA-level Colombo Security Conclave** in which it is a **member-state**, along with **India**, Sri Lanka and Mauritius.
- Earlier Muizzu had vowed **to change the Maldives's 'India First' policy** adopted under his predecessor Solih and **remove Indian military personnel** from the island nation.
- The Maldives has **decided not to renew** the hydrography cooperation agreement with India after its expiry on 7 June 2024.
 - ◆ It was **signed in 2019** that allowed India to carry out hydrographic surveys in the territorial waters of the Maldives, mapping underwater surfaces and studying reefs, lagoons, coastlines and other physical features.
 - ◆ **According to the terms of this agreement:** If one party wishes to drop the agreement, the other party must be informed of the decision six months before the agreement is set to expire.
 - ◆ The agreement automatically renews for an additional five years.

India's Reaction:

- India has made clear that it would prefer to **continue strong engagement** with the Maldives and not want to risk its position as a leading partner and has responded by funding big connectivity projects in Maldives.
- There is a speculation in India that **China is developing a naval base** in the Maldives.
 - ◆ In 2018, China planned an **ocean observatory in Makunudhoo Atoll**, north of Male — not far from India's Lakshadweep Islands.

Do you know?

- **China** is unique in using its marine and seabed surveys to advance a largely strategic agenda.
- It has an expansive oceanographic research programme, in which **'scientific research vessels'** in particular the **Shi Yan Class** of oceanographic survey vessels and the **Yuan Wang series of intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance ships** are regularly deployed in the Indian Ocean.

Importance of India and Maldives:

- The Maldives' proximity to India — barely 70 nautical miles from the island of Minicoy in Lakshadweep, and 300 nautical miles from the mainland's western coast — at the intersection of commercial sea-lanes running through the Indian Ocean, makes it strategically important for India, particularly in the light of China's growing aggression in the region.
- India's geographic proximity to the **Maldives is unlikely to change** despite the frequent shifts in the Maldives' foreign policy.

Political Relations:

- India was among the **first to recognize the Maldives** after its independence in 1965 and later established its mission at Male in 1972.

- ◆ They share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links.
- Both nations are founding members of the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**, the South Asian Economic Union and signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement.
 - ◆ They have consistently supported each other in **multilateral areas such as the UN, the Commonwealth, the NAM, and the SAARC.**
- The **Memorandums of Understanding (MoU)** signed between both the countries covers areas such as hydrography, health, passenger and cargo services by sea, capacity building in customs and civil service training.

Strategic Relationship:

- In the Indian Ocean, the Maldives archipelago comprising 1,200 coral islands lies next to key shipping lanes which ensure uninterrupted energy supplies to countries like China, Japan, and India.
- The Maldives is India's **key maritime neighbour** in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and occupies a special place in **India's vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the 'Neighbourhood First Policy'.**

Defence:

- A technical agreement on sharing '**White Shipping Information**' between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force was also signed, enabling the exchange of prior information on the movement of commercial, non-military vessels.
- **Ekuverin** is a joint military exercise between India and Maldives.

Trade and Economy:

- India and Maldives signed **a trade agreement in 1981**, which provides for the export of essential commodities.
- India provides essential food items like rice, wheat flour, sugar, dal, onion, potato and eggs and construction material such as sand and stone aggregates to the Maldives on favourable terms.
 - ◆ India has a **positive Balance of Trade with the Maldives.**

Development Assistance Programme:

- India has helped the Maldives in many diverse areas to bolster the development of the Maldives e.g. Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, Maldives Institute of Technical Education (now called the Maldives Polytechnic), India-Maldives Faculty of Hospitality & Tourism Studies, Technology Adoption Programme in Education Sector in the Maldives, a port on Gulhifalhu, airport redevelopment at Hanimaadhoo, and a hospital and a cricket stadium in Hulhumale etc.
- **India's crucial help to the Maldives:**
 - ◆ **Operation Cactus:** It was an **attempt by a group of Maldivians** and assisted by armed mercenaries of a Tamil secessionist organisation from Sri Lanka to overthrow the government in the island republic of Maldives in 1988.
 - The coup failed due to the intervention of the Indian Army.
 - ◆ **Operation Neer** was initiated by the Indian government to help the Maldives after a major fire broke out at the Male Water and Sewerage Company.
 - ◆ The Maldives urged India for help following the collapse of the island's only water treatment plant, India helped by sending its heavy-lift transporters like C-17 Globemaster III, Il-76 carrying bottled water.

Concerns in India-Maldives Relations:

- **Political instability:** Change in government and a constitutional crisis has led to political instability in the Maldives and tensions between the two countries.
- **China's increasing influence:** India has been concerned about the increasing Chinese influence in the Maldives, including large infrastructure projects and loans.
 - ◆ The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other Chinese projects.

- ◆ China's desire to settle border disputes with its neighbours (excluding India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.
- **Economic issues:** The Maldives has been facing an economic crisis, which has led to delays in the implementation of development projects and debt issues.
- **Difference in approach to terrorism and extremism:** India has been concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism in the Maldives and has been urging the Maldives government to take firm action against it.
 - ◆ However, Maldives has its own approach and concerns regarding the same.
- **Tourism:** India has been a major market for Maldives tourism, but the Maldives has been trying to diversify its tourism market and reduce its dependence on India.

Way Forward and Suggestions

- India needs more engagement with the domestic politics of the Maldives.
 - ◆ The recent election in Maldives has shown that **small changes** in the domestic balance of power **can produce major changes** in the external orientation of Maldives.
- India must work with its **like-minded partners in the Gulf** to prevent any potential destabilisation of the Maldives by Turkey.
 - ◆ Saudi Arabia and the UAE have often been at the receiving end of Turkey's regional assertiveness and have a stake in preventing the Maldives from being sucked into a Turkish sphere of influence.
- India can't adopt a defensive strategy limited to South Asia, as Turkey advances into the Maldives.
 - ◆ India needs **a more active posture in Turkey's neighbourhood** to improve India's position in the intensifying geopolitical joust with Turkey.
- Both countries need to discuss ways to further bolster India-Maldives relations in sectors pertaining to economic relations, development cooperation, and people-to-people ties.

Source: *TH*

DAILY MAINS QUESTION

Highlight the major challenges involved in India-Maldives relations with reference to stability in the Indo Ocean Region (IOR)