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TOPIC

Maldives-India Ties

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MALDIVES-INDIA TIES

Context

- Nearly a year after Maldives President election, Mohamed Muizzu made his first bilateral visit seen as an attempt to mend fences with India, and the Prime Minister of India ensured that India is always the 'first responder' for the Maldives in times of need.

Brief About the



India and Maldives Relation

- The **Maldives' proximity to India** 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.

Political Relations

- India was among the **first to recognise 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**.

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.

New Beginnings and Old Complexities in India-Maldives Ties

- The relationship between India and the Maldives has always been a blend of strategic cooperation and occasional friction.

Recent Developments

- The election of President Mohamed Muizzu marked a turning point in Maldives-India relations. Initially, Muizzu's '**India Out**' campaign rhetoric created tensions, but recent diplomatic efforts have aimed at mending these ties.
- It had vowed **to change the Maldives's 'India First' policy** adopted under his predecessor Solih and **remove Indian military personnel** from the island nation.
 - ◆ Additionally, After election result, his decision to visit Turkey, China, and the UAE before India further complicated matters
- President Muizzu's visit to India and subsequent high-level discussions with Indian officials, including the Prime Minister, have paved the way for renewed cooperation.

Economic and Strategic Cooperation

- India has extended substantial economic support to the Maldives, including a **\$100 million subscription to Maldivian T-bills** and a **₹3,000 crore currency swap arrangement**. These measures are crucial for stabilising the Maldivian economy and managing its debt.
 - ◆ Additionally, both nations have announced new joint infrastructure projects and are **exploring a Free Trade Agreement**, highlighting the economic interdependence between the two countries.

Defence and Security

- Security remains a critical aspect of India-Maldives relations. India's military presence in the Maldives has been a contentious issue, with calls for the replacement of Indian troops with technical personnel. It aims to address Maldivian concerns while maintaining security cooperation.
- The strategic location of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean makes it a vital partner for India in ensuring regional stability and countering external influences, particularly from China.

Tourism and Investment

- Tourism is a cornerstone of the Maldivian economy, and India plays a significant role as a source market. President Muizzu's visit to Agra, Mumbai and Bengaluru underscored the importance of Indian tourists and investors.
- Efforts to restore pre-pandemic tourist levels and attract Indian investments are crucial for the Maldives' economic recovery.

China's growing influence in the Maldives

- **Geopolitical Competition:** The Maldives' strategic location in the Indian Ocean makes it a key player in the geopolitical rivalry between India and China. China's increasing presence in the Maldives, through infrastructure projects and financial aid, challenges India's traditional influence in the region.
- **Economic Dependencies:** China has invested heavily in the Maldives, particularly through the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**. These investments include major infrastructure projects like the **Sinamalé Bridge** and the expansion of **Malé International Airport**.
 - ♦ While these projects boost the Maldivian economy, they also increase the Maldives' debt to China, raising concerns about a **potential 'debt trap'**.
- **Security Concerns:** China's involvement in the Maldives extends to security cooperation, which can be seen as a counterbalance to India's military presence. It creates tension, as India views the Maldives as part of its strategic sphere of influence and is wary of Chinese military activities in the region.
- **Political Shifts:** Changes in the Maldivian government often lead to shifts in foreign policy that can strain Maldives-India relations, especially when new agreements with China are perceived as undermining India's interests.
- **Public Sentiment and Diplomacy:** The Maldivian public and political factions are divided on the issue of foreign influence. While some view China's investments as beneficial, others are concerned about sovereignty and the long-term implications of Chinese debt. This division influences the diplomatic strategies of both India and China in the Maldives

India's Multifaceted Strategy To Counter China

- **Strengthening Regional Alliances:** India actively engages with **neighbouring countries** to build **strong bilateral relationships**. It includes economic aid, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic support.
 - ♦ For instance, India has enhanced its ties with countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal to counterbalance China's influence.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** India collaborates with like-minded countries through multilateral forums and strategic partnerships. The **QUAD (comprising India, the US, Japan, and Australia)** is a key example, where these nations work together to **ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region**.
- **Military Modernisation:** India is modernising its military capabilities to deter any potential threats from China. This includes upgrading its naval and air forces, enhancing border security, and conducting joint military exercises with allies.
- **Economic Initiatives:** India promotes regional economic integration through initiatives like the SAARC and the BIMSTEC. These efforts aim to create economic interdependence that can counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.

- **Infrastructure Development:** India invests in infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries to provide alternatives to Chinese investments. This includes building roads, ports, and railways that enhance connectivity and economic growth in the region.
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** India engages in proactive diplomacy to address regional concerns and build goodwill. This includes high-level visits, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people connections to strengthen ties with neighbouring countries

Conclusion

- The turnaround in Maldives-India relations is a testament to the power of subtle diplomacy over muscular posturing. It underscores the importance of sensitive and nuanced engagement in international relations.
- As Prime Minister Modi aptly put it, India remains the 'first responder' for the Maldives in times of need, reaffirming the deep-rooted ties between the two nations.

Source: TH

Mains Practice Question

[Q] How has India's role as a first responder in the Maldives strengthened the bilateral relationship between the two countries? How crucial is the Maldives-India relationship to the stability and security of the Indian Ocean region?

