

# India-Maldives Relations [UPSC Notes]

As part of the government's "Neighborhood First" strategy, the Maldives are strategically significant to India because of their location in the Indian Ocean. Although the relationship between India and the Maldives has always been close, friendly, and multifaceted, recent regime instability in the country has presented significant challenges, particularly in the political and strategic spheres.

It is important for the IAS Exam aspirants to know about India-Maldives relations which is important considering the international relations syllabus of the UPSC Mains General Studies Paper-II.

This article will provide you with relevant facts about Maldives and India's relations with each other in different sectors.

## Background of India-Maldives relations

India and the Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity and enjoy close, cordial and multi-dimensional relations. India was among the first to recognise the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country. India established its mission at the level of CDA in 1972 and resident High Commissioner in 1980. The Maldives opened a full-fledged High Commission in New Delhi in November 2004, at that time one of its only four diplomatic missions worldwide.

There have been a number of bilateral visits between Maldives-India:

- The President of Maldives visited India in August 2022, with the aim of tightening geo-political, security, and economic ties between the two geographically and economically dependent South Asian neighbours. The visit happened in the backdrop of a tremulous time for both the nation's common neighbour Sri Lanka which is facing an economic free-fall and political turmoil.
- In July 2022 Chief of Maldives National Defence Forces, Major General Abdulla Shamaal, visited India to expand the defence cooperation between the two neighbouring countries.
- The Home Ministers of both countries met each other in February 2020 – A discussion on security and law enforcement cooperation took place.
- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Maldives in 2018 for the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected Maldives President, Mohamed Solih.
- Maldives President Solih visited India in 2018 – the Maldives reaffirmed its India-first policy.

## Important MoU between India and Maldives

- In July 2022 the cabinet approved the signing of an MoU for Judicial Cooperation between India and Maldives which will accelerate court digitisation and boost prospects for IT companies and start-ups in both countries.
- India-Maldives have signed four Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) in November 2020. The four MoUs signed between the two countries are:
  - Two MoUs are signed for high-impact community development projects.
  - One MoU is signed between Maldives-India on sports and youth affairs' cooperation.

- One MoU is signed for the grant of 100 million USD grant, as a part of India's 500 million USD package for GMCP.
- MoU on cooperation in the field of Hydrography
- MoU on cooperation in the field of Health
- MoU on the establishment of Passenger cum Cargo service by sea
- MoU for cooperation in Customs' capacity building
- MoU between Maldives Civil Service Commission and India's National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG)
- Technical Agreement on the exchange of White Shipping Information between Indian Navy & MNDF.

### What is the Greater Male Connectivity Project?

It is the largest civilian infrastructure project in the Maldives. The project will connect the Maldives' capital Male with three islands:

- Villingili
- Gulhifalhu
- Thilafushi

### India's 500 Million USD Package for GMCP

To help the Maldives cope with the economic slowdown post-COVID-19 pandemic; India committed a 500 million US Dollar package. The package includes air, sea, intra-island and telecommunications.

- India to provide a **grant of 100 million USD** and a **new line of credit of 400 million USD** under the Greater Male Connectivity Project.
- To promote import and export to-and-fro from Maldives and India; a **direct cargo ferry service** to run between the two countries.
- India and Maldives to operationalize air bubbles to transport people from both sides for employment, tourism, medical emergencies etc. The Maldives is the first country with which India has operationalized a travel bubble.

Learn more about [Air Travel Bubble](#) from the linked article.



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## Strategic Importance of Maldives

- **Security:**
  - The Maldives are crucial for maintaining the region's political stability and security, as well as for safeguarding Indian commerce and investment.
  - India and Maldives clearly have a responsibility to ensure stability and security in the Indian Ocean. India wants to see the Maldives embrace Quad's Pacific strategy, which brings together India, the US, Japan, and Australia.
- **Economic:**
  - Despite its small size, a number of developed and developing nations are now courting the Maldives. Due to the strategic significance of the Maldives' geographic location in relation to important international shipping lanes (ISLs).
  - The Indian Ocean is a major route for the transfer of energy and trade around the world. The Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden, two chokepoints in the western Indian Ocean, are located on either side of the Maldives, which is situated physically like a "toll gate" between them.
  - The management and use of marine resources sustainably is crucial for India's success in the blue economy.
- **Global Support:**
  - Maldives supports India's permanent membership and India's candidature for a non-permanent seat to the year 2020-21.
  - They both belong to the Commonwealth and have backed one another in forums around the world like the NAM.
- **Anti-terror Operations:**
  - It supports India in counterterrorism efforts. Radical influences are very strong in the Maldives.
  - In-depth defence cooperation, as well as antiterrorism efforts, are also being conducted by India and the Maldives. The Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, Countering Violent Extremism, and Deradicalization was convened with participation from both sides.

## Trade and Economic Relations:

- In 2021, India became the Maldives' third-largest trading partner. Bilateral commerce between India and the Maldives exceeded \$300 million for the first time in 2021, totalling an amazing \$ 323.29 million.
  - Scrap metals make up the majority of Maldives imports to India.
  - Engineering and industrial goods like medications and pharmaceuticals, radar equipment, rock boulders, aggregates, cement, and agricultural goods like rice, spices, fruits, vegetables, chicken products, etc. are just a few of the items that India sells to the Maldives.
- The economic backbone of the Maldives is tourism. Today, the nation is a popular travel destination for Indians.

- India continues to be the Maldives' top source market for tourists outside of trade relations. India is the top-ranking tourism market in 2022 with 132,151 tourists arriving (as of 20 July'22), accounting for 14.7 percent of the market.

## India-Maldives Political relations

Bilateral relations have been nurtured and strengthened by regular contacts at the highest levels. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, almost all the Prime Ministers of India have visited the Maldives. Former President Gayoom made a number of visits to India. President Mohamed Nasheed's first visit abroad after assuming office was to India in December 2008. In October 2009, President Nasheed attended the Delhi High-Level Conference on Climate Change and Technology Transfer.

In 2010 President Nasheed visited India twice, first in January for the CII-Partnership Summit in Chennai and in October for attending the Opening ceremony of the 19th Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. In the current year, President Nasheed made an official visit in February 2011. On international issues, Maldives had consistently supported India in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the NAM and the SAARC. The Maldives was one of the first countries to convey its support for the candidature of Shri Kamallesh Sharma as the Commonwealth Secretary-General. The Maldives also co-sponsored the G-4 draft resolutions on United Nations reforms.



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## Bilateral Assistance

Wherever possible, India has been offering assistance to the Maldives in its developmental process. The major projects executed by India are:

**(i) Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital: (IGMH)** During former Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Male' in 1986, it was agreed to establish a medical complex in Male' with Indian assistance. Accordingly, the 200-bed hospital was established at an estimated cost of Rs.42.5 crores and inaugurated in April 1995. IGMH, Male now serves as the most advanced tertiary care hospital in the Maldives and is easily the most visible symbol of India's assistance to the Maldives. Though at present, the Government of Maldives is responsible for managing/running the hospital, the Government of India continues to offer substantial assistance to the institution.

**(ii) Faculty of Engineering Technology (FET):** Maldives Institute of Technical Education (MITE) was set up as a grant-in-aid project of the Government of India in 1996. Having a capacity to train at least 200 students a year in various technical/vocational disciplines, MITE was renamed as Faculty of



Engineering Technology (FET) in order to better reflect the academic programmes conducted by it, is functioning well.

## Disaster-relief Assistance

Following the tsunami waves that hit the Maldives on the morning of 26 December 2004, India was the first country to rush relief and aid to the Maldives. A Coast Guard Dornier aircraft arrived on the morning of 27th December followed by two Indian Air Force Avros carrying relief materials on the same day. All the aircraft stayed back to continue their relief operations in the Maldives. INS Mysore carrying relief material, facilities for a 20-bed hospital and 2 helicopters arrived on December 28. She was joined by INS Udaygiri and INS Aditya on December 29. The ships operated in the most affected Southern Atolls.

The ships delivered foodstuff & medicines, treated patients in a field hospital set up by their medics, undertook the repair of electricity generators & communication equipment and also evacuated patients in the shipborne helicopters when required. The total cost of India's relief operations has been estimated at Rs. 36.39 crores. The Government of India also sanctioned a budget support aid of Rs.10 crores to the Maldives in 2005 in response to President Gayoom's request for financial help in view of the serious financial difficulties the Maldives was facing on account of the tsunami and related factors.

## Economic Assistance

During the visit of President Nasheed to India in December 2008, the Government of India extended a Standby Credit Facility of US\$100 million to the Maldives. Again a new Standby Credit Facility of US\$ 100 million was extended to the Government of Maldives during the November 2011 visit of Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh to the Maldives.

## Military Assistance

At the crack of dawn in November 1988, speedboats carrying 80 armed militants of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) landed in the Maldives and along with local defector allies who had infiltrated the country, began a coup d'état. The plot, planned in Sri Lanka by the Tamil nationalist group was believed to be an attempt by a Maldivian businessman and politician opposed to the regime of the President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom to gain control while the PLOTE sought a safe haven and base for its activities. Experts believe that this coup was a result of the spillover from the civil war happening in Sri Lanka.

The insurgents took control of the airport in Malé, the national capital, but failed to capture the President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who had fled thanks to the aid of his loyal guards. Upon his escape, he asked for military aid from India on 3 November. The then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi responded by ordering 1,600 troops to aid the Maldivian government. In a military operation codenamed "Operation Cactus," Indian forces arrived within 12 hours of the request for aid being made, squashed the coup attempt and achieved full control of the country within hours. 19 PLOTE militants were killed and 1 Indian soldier wounded.

India's intervention was endorsed by other nations such as the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and its neighbours Nepal and Bangladesh.

## Earlier Developments in Maldives-India Relations

- In the wake of a drinking water crisis in Malé' on 4 December 2014, following the collapse of the island's only water treatment plant, Maldives urged India for immediate help. India came to the rescue by sending its heavy-lift transporters like C-17 Globemaster III, Il-76 carrying bottled water. The navy also sent her ships like INS Sukanya, INS Deepak and others which can produce freshwater using their onboard desalination plants.
- Maldives' first democratically elected President from 2008 to 2012 Mohammed Nasheed, was arrested on 22 February 2015 on terror charges. India and the US expressed concern over Nasheed's arrest and manhandling. Indian PM Modi was to also visit the Maldives in the second week of March as a part four-nation visit to Indian Ocean neighbours. But, he later omitted the Maldives from his tour.

## Potential Causes of Stress in Relationship

- **Radicalisation:**
  - Over the past ten years or more, more Maldivians have become attracted to terrorist organisations like the Islamic State (IS), Pakistan-based madrassas, and jihadist groups.
  - Islamist radicalism is on the rise in the island nation for a number of reasons, chief among them being political instability and socioeconomic uncertainty.
  - The radicalisation of the Maldives has also been influenced by events in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and West Asia. This raises the risk that terrorist organisations with a base in Pakistan could use distant Maldivian islands as a jumping-off point for strikes against India and Indian interests.
- **Relationship Stressors:**
  - **Political Turbulence:** India's main concern has been how the political instability in the region will affect its security and prosperity.
  - The political turmoil that followed Mohamed Nasheed's detention in February 2015 on terrorism-related charges has put India's neighbourhood policy to a true diplomatic test.
- **China's Concern:**
  - China's strategic presence has grown in the area surrounding India. A significant "pearl" in China's "String of Pearls" strategy in South Asia has emerged as the Maldives.
  - There are speculations that China may be attempting to establish strategic outposts in the archipelago due to its strategic location in the Indian Ocean.

Relations between India and the Maldives are essential for the stability of the Indo-Pacific and its maritime security. As part of the government's "Neighbourhood First" strategy, India continues to be a dedicated development partner for a secure, prosperous, and peaceful Maldives. However, Maldives should also continue with its "India First" policy for the sake of maintaining a strategic level of comfort in relations.