



India-Maldives Relations: *Its flux through decades*

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Abstract

The largest and most powerful state in South Asia is India, while the smallest one is the Maldives. Yet, since the Maldives emerged as an independent state, its foreign relations with India have flourished as a neighbouring country. Basically, the stature of the Maldives has immeasurably upsurged its geopolitical gravity. While this relationship has continued in the twenty-first century, India's whimsy and China's dominance have led to a slight decline, which is, at least, somewhat detrimental to India's security interests. In this article, attempts have been made to form a geopolitical continuum of India-Maldives relations (security, trade and culture, etc.) and its flex until the present decade.

Key Words: Geopolitics, Security, Hegemony, Cultural, Trade.

Introduction

The Republic of Maldives is an archipelago nation in the West Indian Ocean. Maldives consists of about 1300 coral islands and sandbanks of which only 202 are permanently inhabited. The country's 26 atolls and thousand-plus islands comprise only 180 square miles of land, housing a population of roughly 500,000. The tiny island state is located in the Indian Ocean of the southern coast of India and south-west of Sri Lanka. Naturally, India and Sri Lanka are its immediate neighbours. However, Despite being the smallest Asian country with a land area, the Maldives draws substantial geopolitical value and interest from its location: It sits astride the Seven Degree Channel and a superhighway of east-west maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. With its islands stretching 500 miles north to south and 80 miles east to west, the Maldives enjoys a huge exclusive economic zone (EEZ) encompassing over 325,000 square miles of prime Indian Ocean real estate. Its strategic location defines the geo-strategic importance of Maldives far beyond its physical size.

Indo-Maldives Bilateral Relation

India-Maldives relation has enjoyed great historical and cultural ties. India was among the first country to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country. India established its mission in 1972 and resident High Commissioner in 1980. And Maldives has opened a full-fledged High Commission in New Delhi in November 2004, which was one of its only four diplomatic missions worldwide at that time. After independence Maldives did not actively participate in international politics but considered India as true friend and adopted *India First policy*. India also considers Maldives as natural ally in the Indian Ocean Region. And Bilateral relations have been nurtured and strengthened by regular contacts at the highest levels. Since establishment of diplomatic relations, almost all the Prime Ministers of India visited the Maldives. Former President Gayoom made a number of visits to India. President Mohamed Nasheed's first visit to 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. President Nasheed made an official visit in February 2011. However, India's relation with Maldives reached considerably low at the period of Waheed and Yameen. During that period Maldives became very close to China.

However, after 2018 general election in Maldives Ibrahim Mohamed Solih came in power. The change of government in the Maldives allowed both countries to positively redefine bilateral relationships, as indicated by high level visits. Modi visited the Maldives in September 2018 to attend the inauguration of President Solih in November 2018, while Solih made a state visit to India in December 2018. Statements made during the visits underscore the importance of enhancing bilateral relations in trade, energy, security, connectivity, socio-economic developments and cooperation in regional and multilateral forums. Indian Prime Minister Modi made his first official visit to Maldives from 8th to 9th June, 2019. During this visit President Solih reaffirmed his government's *India-First Policy* and pledged his government's full support towards deepening the multifaceted, mutually beneficial partnership between India and the Maldives, which has traditionally been characterized by trust, transparency, mutual understanding and sensitivity. A number of agreements signed between the two-side including in the field of Hydrography, Health, Passenger cargo service by sea and telecommunication. The visit is reflective of the new momentum in high-level exchanges between India and the Maldives.

On international issues Maldives had consistently supported India in multilateral fora, such as the UN, the Commonwealth, the NAM and the SAARC. Maldives was one of the first countries to convey its support for the candidature of Shri Kamallesh Sharma as the Commonwealth Secretary General. Maldives also co-sponsored the G-4 draft resolutions on UN reforms. In return, India also extended support to Maldives candidature for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for the term 2019-20 (MEA, 2012).

Strategic Importance of Maldives

Geo-strategic importance of Maldives is far beyond its physical size. Despite being the smallest country in Asia with a land area of just 300 sq. km and a population of around 5 lakhs, Maldives is one of the world's most geographically dispersed countries straddling a 960-km-long submarine ridge running north to south and which forms a wall in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It is located at the southern and northern parts of this island chain, which are the only two passages through which ships can pass safely. Both these sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) are critical for maritime trade flow between the Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia. While the Indian Ocean is considered as the key highway for global trade and energy flow, Maldives virtually stands as a toll gate (Singh, 2019).

Thus, while the ISLs in the vicinity of the Maldives have broad strategic significance for global maritime trade, they are of particular importance to India. Fifty percent of India's external trade and eighty percent of its energy imports transit these ISLs.

As maritime economic activity in the Indian Ocean has risen dramatically in recent decades, the geopolitical competition too in the Indian Ocean has intensified. Maldives plays a key role in this geopolitical competition due to her strategic maritime geography.

China is one of the main competitors in the region with its strategic interests and logistical limitations in the Indian Ocean have prompted it to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean. Maldives is adjacent to the main regional shipping routes, making it an important Indian Ocean to hold. China has established bilateral relations with the Maldives in 1972. Though it was confined to just a trade relation. The turning point of the Sino-Maldivian relations came after Abdullah Yameen came in power in 2013. Since then, China has increased its influence in the geopolitics of the region.

In July 2015, Maldives amended its constitution to allow foreign ownership of land. After this new land ownership rule there is a speculation that China is trying to establish military infrastructure in Maldives allot. According to a latest satellite image and earlier a report published by a reputed News agency Chinese leased Maldivian island of Feydhoo Finolhu Island has undergone a massive facelift. The island leased until 2066 by China from Maldivian government for \$4 million. According to Nitin J Ticku, an analyst to a news journal, the rapid construction on the island indicates a strong possibility of Chinese military base. Though China has rejected this claim. So far, Beijing has seized 17 islands through an "opaque leasing process", which means that projects started as real estate projects before turning into something else. Even if China was to turn the Feydhoo Islands into a military base, Maldives does not have the firepower to stop it (Srivastava, 2020).

Chinese ambitions to acquire a military base in the Maldives can be explained via the String of Pearl's theory. The theory refers to the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities developed by Beijing in countries in the Indian Ocean region stretching from the Chinese mainland to the Middle East. The Chinese government has vehemently denied that such a strategy exists but its actions say otherwise. Beijing has access to outposts in strategic locations in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Djibouti. In Myanmar, China has control over Kyaukpyu port, a commercial maritime facility that can be doubled as a military facility should conflict ever arise. China also maintains a naval intelligence unit at a base in Coco Islands, near the UT of Andaman and Nicobar Island. In Sri Lanka, a Chinese company has leased the Hambantota Port for 99 years as part of a deal with the government. New Delhi fears that the port could eventually be used by Beijing to dock submarines. Similar fears are shared for the port in Gwadar in Pakistan which was also developed by the Chinese under CPEC. With ports in all three countries, China is now left without access to an outpost in the Indian Ocean and the speculated military base near the Maldives could change this. Chinese presence in Feydhoo Island only 900 km away from Mincoy Island in the Union Territory and close to 1000 kms from the Indian mainland (Srivastava, 2020). China would have surrounded India on all three sides in the Indian Ocean. This will pose a direct threat to India's security and freedom of movement in Indian Ocean.

India- Maldives Defence Relations

Since 1988, defence and security have been major areas of cooperation between India and the Maldives because both the country faces the similar challenges in Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Commonalties of security perceptions and interests in the Indian Ocean have imposed much more responsibility upon India as the biggest country of South Asia, as it has to take the initiative for a confidence and security building regime. To that end, economic cooperation is not enough. A comprehensive security strategy particularly regarding Indian Ocean, is more important for security and integrity of this region, as well as, for stability and economic prosperity. It is in this context that India had to render its support to counter the coup d'etat against the government of President Gayoom organized by one of his senior ministers on 3rd November 1988. Since then, India has been providing Maldives with defence training and equipment requirements. Now, India provides the largest number of training opportunities for the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), meeting around 70 percent of their defence training requirements.

India and Maldives signed numbers of defence agreement to cooperate and maintain peace and stability in the region, under which in 2006 Indian navy gifted a Trinkat Class Fast Attack Craft to Maldives National Defence Force.

After 2008, Mumbai Terrorist Attack in India started the process to bring the island country into India's security grid over fears that one of its island resorts could be taken over by terrorists for another such attack, by giving its lack of military assets and surveillance capabilities. In this regard, in August 2009, contemporary Indian Defence Minister Mr. A. K. Anthony visited Maldives and signed a bilateral pact with the Maldives. Due to the agreement signed in 2009, India permanently based two helicopters in the Maldives for surveillance and one Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) based on Addu Island and Hannimadhoo Island. India also helped in setting up radar stations on all 26 atolls which will be networked with the Indian coastal radar system and interlinked with the central control room in India's Coastal Command (Ghosh 2014: 288). In addition to the above, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) was tasked to utilise its Dornier aircraft for regular surveillance sorties over the islands.

Ekuverin, which means "Friends" in Dhivehi language, is an annual joint military exercise is also held every year since 2009 between India and Maldives. The exercise aims to enhance the interoperability between the Indian Army and Maldives National Defence Force in order to effectively undertake counter-terrorism operations in urban or semi-urban environments. The tenth edition of joint military exercise *Ekuverian* conducted in 2019.

Another military exercise called *DOSTI*, initiated in 1991, between Indian and Maldivian Coast Guard. However, Sri Lanka joined the group in 2012 and since the trilateral exercise conducted on regular bases. The fifteenth edition of the exercised conducted in Maldives in 2021, which will farther fortify the friendship and enhance mutual cooperation between these countries.

However, India's relation with Maldives declined in the regime of Abdullah Yameen (2013-18). He came to power by criticizing India's presence in Maldives. During his period Maldives foreign policy shifted toward China and signed number of controversial agreements with China and Indo-Maldivian relation faced number of obstacles. Even he declined to renew the helicopter deal for surveillance and asked India to take back two helicopters gifted by India. But in 2018 election Abdullah Yameen's Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) lost the election and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) form the government. Under the leadership of new President Mohammad Solih Maldives again reinforced 'India First policy'.

After the formation of new Government, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi first visited Maldives in September 2018 to attend Mohammad Solih's presidential inauguration ceremony, while Solih made a state visit to India in December 2018. During his first visit Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih jointly inaugurated a Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) built by India and a composite training facility of the Maldives National Defence Force. The CSRS is the primary sensor for Integrated Coastal Surveillance System. This programme contributed in creating a network of information to maritime domain awareness in the strategic Indian Ocean region. The two leaders also jointly inaugurated the composite training facility of the Maldives National Defence Force in Maafilaafushi. Statements made during the visits underscored the importance of enhancing bilateral relations in trade, energy, security, connectivity, socio-economic developments and cooperation in regional and multilateral forums.

Defence Minister Mariya Didi accompanied by Chief of Defence Force Major General Shamaal visited India in January 2019, during which the 2nd Defence Cooperation Dialogue was held. In the same year, former EAM Late Smt Sushma Swaraj visited Maldives on 17-18 March 2019, ahead of the Parliamentary elections in Maldives (April 6) and met President, Speaker and 10 Ministers. The Line of Credit Agreement for \$800 million (as a part of the financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion) was signed during the visit. The Agreement for Exemption of Visa Requirement for Holders of Diplomatic and Official Passports, MoU regarding Indian grant assistance for Implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects through Local Bodies and MoU on Cooperation in the field of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy were also signed during the visit. India gifted 2500 LED street lights and 2 lakh LED bulbs to Malé City Council.

On February 21, 2021, India signed a pact with Maldives to develop, support and maintain a harbour for the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and Coast Guard for maritime security in the region during the visit of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. The Coast Guard Harbour & Dockyard at SIFAVARU will mark another significant milestone which will strengthen Maldivian Coast Guard capability and facilitate regional HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) efforts. According to the India-Maldives joint statement, the pact was signed pursuant to the request by the Government of Maldives in April 2013 for India's support and cooperation in enhancing the capability of the MNDF in maritime surveillance, and subsequent requests in October 2015 and March 2016. The joint statement also made a mention of the Action Plan for Defence Cooperation signed in April 2016 between the two countries, Defence Cooperation Dialogues in July 2016 and January 2019, and Joint Staff Talks in June 2018, January 2019, June 2019, and September 2019, which finally led to inking the pact.

The dockyard to be developed at the Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) Naval Base, northwest of Male, will strengthen the Maldivian defence capabilities. According to Maldives officials, the Maldives Coast Guard needs a designated harbour and dockyard to repair and dock vessels, especially since it attends to over 700 distress calls and conducts approximately 300 operations on an annual basis, apart from handling transnational crimes and conducting medical evacuations. By making a presentation during a seminar at US Pacific Command at Hawaii in 2011, the officer from MNDF Coast Guard had stated that Maldives would welcome an international presence in face of mounting sea piracy; Maldives during those days was being repeatedly attacked by sea pirates.

India-Maldives trade relations and investment

Trade and investment are another dimension to understand the relations between the two countries. India and Maldives signed a comprehensive trade agreement in 1981 and signed free-trade agreement with other South Asian nations in 2004. Since then, Indian trade relations with Maldives has expanded significantly. India has provided extensive economic aid and has participated in bilateral programmes for the development of infrastructure, health, telecommunications and labour resources. India established Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH) in capital city Male which consist of 200 beds inaugurated in 1995 is now most advanced hospital in Maldives. The State Bank of India has been playing a vital role in the economic development of the Maldives since February, 1974 by providing loan assistance for promotion of island resorts, export of marine products and business enterprises. Taj Group of India runs Taj Exotica Resort & Spa and Vivanta Coral Reef Resort in Maldives. In November 2010, GMR Infrastructure (India) and KLIA (Malaysia) consortium took over the Male International Airport on a 2-year BOT contract to renovate and expand the largest and most important airport in the country. Earlier, in November 2009, Suzlon Energy of India signed an MoU to set up a 25 MW wind farm at an investment of \$40 million in the Southern Province of Maldives and Shri Educare of Delhi signed an MoU to take over the management of Ghiyassudin School, the first such initiative under the privatization policy of the Government of Maldives. In July 2010, Bommidala Infrastructure of India signed an agreement for 25 MW solar energy project in the Upper Southern province. Other proposals in the area of education, renewable energy, health and waste management are also under active consideration. In December 2010, Government of India announced a new Line of Credit worth \$40 million to the Government of Maldives for construction of 500 housing units (MEA, 2013).

Between 1978 and 2008, under Maldives' former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, India enjoyed favourable ties with the country without significant interference from China. Such an exclusive relationship ended when Maldives government, under Presidents Mohammed Waheed Hassan and Abdulla Yameen, welcomed Chinese investments and undertakings in its economy and beyond. In 2012, the Waheed government took a loan of \$500 million from China, and closeness between China and Maldives became even clearer when they signed a military aid agreement in the same year (Palanisamy, 2020). China is now largest trade partner of Maldives with 16.49% of its annual trade. China exported to Maldives \$338 million while Maldives export to China was \$30.4 million in 2019. Chinese investment in the field of tourism, infrastructure, health, energy and telecommunication had increased tremendously. While the total trade between China and Maldives \$29,149 in the year 2012. It increased to \$274.86 thousand million in 2020. With the growing relation with China, Maldives is moving further from India's sphere of influence.

However, with new government in Maldives in 2018, India came back on track. To counter Chinese influence and improve relation with Maldives \$4 billion of financial assistance was provided by India for socio-economic development programs in Maldives. India also announced a \$800 million line of credit to finance infrastructure projects during the visit of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to the Maldives in March 2019 (Mallempati 2019).

India will fund the implementation of the Greater Malé Connectivity Project through a \$ 400 million Line of Credit and \$ 100 million grant. The 6.7 km Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP) will be the largest civilian infrastructure project in the Maldives, connecting Malé with three neighbouring islands - Villingili, Gulhifahu and Thilafushi. India is now second largest trade partner of Maldives in 2020. Indian imports from the Maldives primarily comprise scrap metals, while Indian exports to the Maldives include a variety of engineering and industrial products like drugs and pharmaceuticals, radar apparatus, rock boulders, aggregates, cement and agriculture produce like rice, spices, fruits, vegetables and poultry produce etc. Exports and imports from Maldives in last eight years are as follows in the table.

Bilateral trade figures (Jan-Dec, in US\$ million)

Year	Total Exports to Maldives	Total Imports from Maldives	Total Trade
2014	170.6	2.9	156.3
2015	225.82	3.0	228.82
2016	274.55	1.55	276.10
2017	282.04	4.12	286.16
2018	286.13	3.01	288.14
2019	290.27	3.42	293.69
2020	242.82	3.33	246.15
2021 (Jan-Aug)	197.93	4.78	202.71

(Source: Maldives Customs Service statistical data)

India- Maldives Cultural Relation

India-Maldives relations is beyond diplomacy and economics. “Despite the high visibility of political and economic themes,” said Mr. Krishna, “it is basically the scope and depth of the people-to people relations at the ground level that ultimately determines the level and warmth of relations between the two countries.”

The first inhabitants of the Maldives were Buddhists from southern India and Sri Lanka around 5 BC, who were originally Sinhalese and Dravidians. Later, Indonesian, Madagascar, Chinese, etc. started living there. The language of Maldives is Divehi, which is an Indo-European language. Apart from English, Hindi and Arabic are also spoken there. Indians are the second largest population in Maldives about 29,000 Indians live and work here, of which 22,000 live in the capital city, Male. They are mainly associated with various professions including education, healthcare and construction projects. More than 25% of teachers in Maldives are Indian. In December 2009, a rock band participated in a cultural event in South Asia. In March 2010, a Maldivian theatre troupe, sponsored by the ICCR, came to Delhi

to perform at the South Asian Theatre Festival. From July to September 2010, the high Commissioner of India, in cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and culture and Indian Club organized the INMAFF (India Maldives Friendship Festival) and the inaugural ceremony in Male, was attended by president Nasheed and senior members of his cabinet. Bollywood star Salman Khan was the special guest in the ceremony. President Nasheed visited India twice in 2010, the second time to attend the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Delhi. On the other hand, the 'India Out' Campaign has taken a wider form in the Maldives in recent years and greatly affected the Indians in the Maldives. Even two Indian teachers have been harassed by the 'India Out' protesters. Though 'India Out' campaign is politically motivated and backed by China. It has created insecurity of Indians working in Maldives.

India-Maldives relation during Covid Pandemic

COVID-19 has emerged as an important form of diplomatic currency around the world as nations try to showcase their soft power gains. In this race, India has an edge as India is already a pharmaceutical giant having produced some 60 per cent of global vaccines and now justly seeking to strengthen ties and expand its influence in its neighbourhood and beyond, observes Dr Rajaram Panda. Indian Air Force (IAF) launched an 18-hour operation and airlifted 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines and hospital consumables with its C-130 transport aircraft and delivered it to the Maldives. Indian navy also launched Mission Sagar in May 2020 to send medical and humanitarian aid to the countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Maldives is one of the first country to receive aid under "Mission Sagar" In September 2020, the Government of India provided 250 million US dollar to the Maldives to mitigate the economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 in the Maldives. The Government of India later adopted the 'Vaccine Maitri' project to help various Allies with covid vaccines. Maldives and Bhutan were the countries to receive 1 lakh of vaccine dose respectively under this project. Later another instalment of 1 lakh dose sent to Maldives.

Conclusion

India's relation with Maldives is comparatively good in South Asian Region. But it also fact that India has failed to win the trust of Maldives. Sikkim's merger with India in 1975, emergence of Bangladesh with active help of India, etc., created a fear-psychosis of Indian hegemony in the minds of her small neighbouring state. In spite of that, India and Maldives maintained a good relation. Specially after India's help to counter a failed coup in Maldives in 1988. But it is also fact that Maldives is concerned about its economic development and cannot isolate itself from international trade and investment. In this regard, Maldives has strengthened its relationship with China. In past few years Chinese presence in Maldives has increased tremendously not only in the field of trade and investment but also in geopolitics. China's presence in Maldives has created security threat for India. India seems to have realised that fact and it has been reflected in Prime Minister Modi's "Neighbourhood First Policy". In this regard, India has provided bilateral assistance and increased its investment. India is also actively using its soft power in Maldives. India's neighbourhood policy will help to expand bilateral ties based on the foundation of mutual trust, understanding and sensitivity to each other's concerns.

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