



Mains Practice Question

Q. Assess the importance of the India-Maldives relationship. Identify the challenges within this bilateral relationship and suggest strategies to overcome them. (250 words)

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Approach

- Start the answer with a discussion that sets a context for the question.
- Discuss the importance of the India-Maldives relationship.
- Discuss the challenges within this bilateral relationship.
- Suggest strategies to improve the bilateral ties.
- Conclude suitably.

Introduction

India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity and enjoy close, cordial and multi-dimensional relations. Maldives is a focal point for the Indian government's priorities under the '**Neighbourhood First Policy**.'

Body

The importance of the India-Maldives relationship:

- **Strategic Significance:** Maldives' proximity to the west coast of India and its situation at the hub of commercial sea lanes running through the Indian Ocean imbues it with significant strategic importance to India.
- **Economic Engagements:** India is amongst the largest sources of visitors to the Maldives, which is heavily dependent on tourism to run its economy.
 - In 2023, India topped the chart in sending the largest number of tourists to the Maldives (2,09,198), with around 11.8 % market share.
- **Trade Agreements:** India emerged as Maldives' 2nd largest trade partner in 2022. The bilateral trade had crossed the USD 300 million mark for the first time in 2021.
- **Infrastructure Projects:** In August 2021, Afcons, an Indian company, signed a contract for the largest-ever infrastructure project in Maldives which is the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP).
- **Cultural Connectivity:** India and Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious links steeped in antiquity. According to anthropologists, the origins of Dhivehi (the Maldivian language) harken back to Sanskrit and Pali.
 - The Indian expatriate community in the Maldives has an approximate strength of 27,000. The majority of the expatriate teachers in Maldives are Indian nationals.

The Key Issues in the India- Maldives Relationship:

- **The Ongoing Lakshadweep Issue:** The controversy ensued when three deputy ministers from the Maldives made derogatory comments about India and the Prime Minister following his recent visit to Lakshadweep.

- This controversy has led many Indians to cancel their holiday bookings in Maldives. The incident underscores the dangers of hypernationalism in the region.
- **The India Out Campaign In Maldives:** The 'India Out' initiative seeks to amplify animosity by instilling scepticism regarding India's investments in the Maldives, the defence partnerships between the two nations, and India's security provisions in the region.
- **Sovereignty and Security Dilemma:** The democratic system in the Maldives is still in its early stages, grappling with regional socio-political instability influenced by major global players.
 - The opposition in Maldives strongly feels that the Indian military presence in the Maldives is a threat to the country's national security and sovereignty.
- **Revocation of Hydrographic Survey Agreement:** Maldives has apprehensions about India's hydrographic activity being a form of intelligence collection.
 - Maldives' recent decision to revoke the agreement with India for joint hydrographic surveys in its waters, causing concern in Indian strategic circles.
- **The China Factor in the Indian Ocean Region:** The Maldives has emerged as an important 'pearl' in China's "String of Pearls" construct in South Asia.
 - Maldives has massive Chinese investment and became a participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Several measures can be considered as a way forward:

- **Discover and Develop Tourism Destinations in India:** India's coastline is adorned with a mix of well-known and undiscovered beach destinations. It is opportune to explore and cultivate the potential of undisclosed and hidden treasures along India's coast.
 - Possible destinations may include places like Goa, Kerala, Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Political Engagement with Local People:** At present, the 'India Out' campaign has support from a limited population, but this should not be taken for granted by the Indian government.
 - The strength of bilateral relations hinges on the ability of a partner government to garner public support for its policies.
 - The government should engage in effective public diplomacy, which involves not only communicating with foreign governments but also with their own citizens and the international community.
- **Unwavering Support for Capacity Building Programmes:** As a development partner, India should provide unwavering support to the Maldives in realizing their aspirations for broad-based socio-economic development and strengthening of democratic and independent institutions in the region.
- **Maximise Maritime Security:** India should participate in efforts to ensure the safety and freedom of navigation in critical sea lanes, contributing to the overall security architecture in the Indian Ocean.
- **Maximize Resources:** India should keep its commitment to regional security by actively participating in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. India can actively engage through QUAD to counter Chinese aggression in the region.

Conclusion

A coordinated synergy between India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy and the Maldives' 'India First' approach is essential for strengthening a mutually beneficial partnership