

Strategic Synergy in the Indian Ocean: India-Maldives Relations

Prof. Gunti Ravinder¹, Dr. Gedam Kamalakar^{2*}

ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean region holds immense geopolitical and geostrategic importance, acting as a hub for global maritime trade and a theater for international power dynamics. Within this framework, India and the Maldives share a deep-rooted historical, cultural, and economic relationship, shaped by proximity and mutual interests. This paper examines the evolving strategic partnership between India and the Maldives, focusing on security cooperation, economic collaboration, and diplomatic engagement. The analysis highlights India's role as a regional power and security guarantor, particularly through initiatives like the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy. It explores the Maldives' significance as a critical node in India's maritime strategy and its potential as a partner in combating challenges such as piracy, terrorism, and climate change. Simultaneously, the study evaluates the influence of external powers, such as China, in reshaping the bilateral dynamic and necessitating greater strategic synergy. Through a multidimensional approach, this paper underscores the importance of a robust India-Maldives partnership in ensuring stability, sustainable development, and security in the Indian Ocean, contributing to the broader regional and global order.

Keywords: Maritime Security, Indo-Pacific Strategy, India's Neighbourhood, Blue Economy, Geopolitical Influence

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) holds immense geopolitical significance, serving as a critical conduit for global trade and a theater for strategic interactions among key global and regional powers. Within this dynamic environment, the relationship between India and the Maldives has emerged as a cornerstone of stability and cooperation. The Maldives, strategically located at the heart of the Indian Ocean, occupies a crucial position in the maritime domain, making it a vital partner for India's regional security framework and broader strategic aspirations. India and the Maldives share deep-rooted historical, cultural, and civilizational ties, which have been further reinforced through contemporary collaborations in areas such as trade, defense, infrastructure, and climate change. Both nations face common challenges, including maritime security threats, transnational crimes, and the need to ensure sustainable development in the face of climate change. This shared vision has propelled the bilateral partnership into a robust and multi-faceted relationship underpinned by mutual trust and shared goals.

¹Dept. of Political Science, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Telangana State, India

²Post-Doctoral Fellow ICSSR, Department of Political Science, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 12, 2024; Revision Received: January 18, 2025; Accepted: January 22, 2025

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This introduction explores the significance of India-Maldives relations in the context of the strategic dynamics of the Indian Ocean. It delves into the evolving nature of this partnership, examining its implications for regional security, economic integration, and environmental sustainability. Through a closer examination of this bilateral relationship, it becomes evident how strategic synergy between India and the Maldives not only strengthens regional stability but also contributes to a more secure and prosperous Indian Ocean Region.

Historical Background

India and the Maldives share deep historical connections, with cultural and trade ties that go back centuries. The Maldives, a small archipelagic nation in the Indian Ocean, has traditionally looked to India as a neighbour and regional partner. Following the Maldives' independence from British protection in 1965, diplomatic relations were established, and India was one of the first nations to recognize the Maldives' sovereignty.

India and Maldives have long enjoyed ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and economic ties. The relationship between the two countries is close, friendly and multi-dimensional. After Maldives became independent in 1965, India was one of the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with Maldives. Maldives is located on the west coast of India (only 70 nautical miles from Mini Koya and 300 nautical miles from the west coast of India) and is at the center of the Indian Ocean trade route, especially the Indian Ocean. It is the most important business in India. India's strategic role in Maldives is well known and India is seen as a cybersecurity provider. Maldives occupies a unique position in India's "environment first" foreign policy, which aims to bring stability and prosperity to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both countries also play a key role in maintaining security in the Indian Ocean Region, contributing to the Indian-led SAGAR (Security and Growth for All Regions) vision. A politically contentious issue. Maldives' one-time claim to Minicoy was resolved by the 1976 Maritime Boundary Agreement between the two countries, and Maldives acknowledged Minicoy as an integral part of India. India's timely support during the 1988 coup led to trust-building and long-term friendly bilateral relations with the Maldives. Concerns about Indian control or territorial ambitions were curbed by our prompt withdrawal when our troops were no longer needed.

Security and Military Cooperation

India has played a significant role in ensuring the security of the Maldives, most notably during the 1988 coup attempt when India launched "Operation Cactus." At the request of then-Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Indian forces intervened to foil the coup attempt, underscoring India's commitment to the stability of the Maldives. This set a precedent for future security cooperation between the two nations. In recent years, as the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean has grown, India and the Maldives have further solidified their security partnership to address regional threats like piracy, terrorism, and the influence of external actors, especially with increased Chinese presence in the region. Regular joint exercises, such as "Ekuverin," and Indian assistance in the form of patrol vessels and training support demonstrate India's continuing role as a security partner.

Economic and Developmental Ties

Economic cooperation has also been a key aspect of the India-Maldives relationship. India is a major trade partner and aid provider to the Maldives. Through the "India First" policy, the Maldives has welcomed significant Indian investments, especially in infrastructure, health, and education. India has extended lines of credit and grants for development projects, including housing, water supply, and port infrastructure. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

India provided medical aid, vaccines, and essential supplies to the Maldives, reinforcing its image as a reliable partner. Additionally, in recent years, India has committed to building key infrastructure, such as the Greater Male Connectivity Project, which is expected to be the largest infrastructure project in the Maldives.

Geopolitical Dynamics and Challenges

The Maldives' location in the Indian Ocean makes it strategically significant for India, especially as China's influence grows in South Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its investments in the Maldives have raised concerns for India about possible Chinese encroachment in the region. Consequently, India has ramped up diplomatic efforts to keep the Maldives within its strategic fold, seeking to balance its relationship with Malé while addressing shared concerns about external influences.

Current Status and Future Prospects

Today, India and the Maldives continue to deepen their bilateral ties through a series of agreements in defense, trade, and maritime cooperation. While challenges remain, particularly due to shifting political landscapes within the Maldives, the two nations continue to underscore the importance of a stable, mutually beneficial relationship. India and the Maldives share a strategic partnership that has grown over the years, influenced by their geographical proximity, shared interests, and regional security concerns. Located near major shipping lanes, the Maldives holds strategic significance in the Indian Ocean, which has made the India-Maldives relationship essential for regional security, economic stability, and defense.

India-Maldives Relations: Key Aspects

- Defense and Security Cooperation:** India is the Maldives' primary defense partner. This includes providing training for Maldivian security forces, carrying out joint exercises, and offering material assistance to bolster the Maldives' maritime security. Given the Maldives' strategic location, these efforts help safeguard the Indian Ocean against piracy, terrorism, and smuggling.
- Economic and Developmental Assistance:** India has actively supported Maldivian infrastructure and development projects, including building hospitals, schools, and roads. India has also extended lines of credit and provided grants for socio-economic development, with the recent "Greater Male Connectivity Project" representing India's largest infrastructure investment in the Maldives.
- Cultural and People-to-People Ties:** With a significant number of Maldivians studying and working in India, people-to-people ties remain strong. The shared cultural and historical ties foster goodwill and mutual respect, enhancing cooperation across various domains.

China's Role and Influence

China's growing influence in the Maldives, especially through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has shifted the geopolitical dynamics in the region. China has invested significantly in infrastructure projects, such as the Sinamalé Bridge and the expansion of the Malé airport, increasing its economic footprint in the Maldives. However, the debts associated with these projects have raised concerns about a potential "debt trap," which could lead to Chinese influence in Maldivian affairs. In response to China's growing presence, India has amplified its engagements, reinforcing the "Neighborhood First" policy to counterbalance Chinese influence. India's approach emphasizes long-term development and partnership, focusing on sustainable assistance rather than loans with high-interest rates.

Strategic Implications in the Indian Ocean Region

- Regional Security:** India and China both recognize the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean. While India's role in the Maldives prioritizes security and stability in the Indian Ocean, China's activities have spurred India to strengthen its naval presence and alliances.
- Countering Influence:** India has deepened diplomatic and strategic ties with the Maldives, positioning itself as a preferred partner by aligning with the Maldivian government's vision for balanced development without over-reliance on any single nation.

India and the Maldives continue to cooperate extensively to balance China's influence while ensuring the Maldives' sovereignty and economic stability. Through consistent engagement, India has maintained its position as a reliable ally and an important partner in the Indian Ocean.

Bilateral Economic and Trade Relations

India and the Maldives signed a trade agreement in 1981 that provided for the export of essential commodities. Bilateral trade between India and the Maldives got off to a slow start; it crossed \$300 million for the first time in 2021 and \$500 million in 2022. Several Line of Credit (LoC) projects have since begun.

India will be the Maldives' second-largest trading partner in 2022 and its largest trading partner in 2023. India's exports from the Maldives mainly consist of scrap metal, while India's exports to the Maldives include chemicals and pharmaceuticals, radar equipment, packaging mill, aggregates, cement and various engineering and industrial products such as rice, spices, fruits, vegetables and poultry and other agricultural products. The Maldives is working hard to unlock the potential of seafood exports to India. President Solih announced that free service will be provided to India on August 1 and 4, 2022 for tuna exports from the Maldives to India. plays an important role. billion US dollars. This financial support was provided through the Maldivian government's housing loan subscription of the Maldivian SBI. India has assured SBI for this financial assistance. In December 2022, the Reserve Bank of India and the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) signed a foreign exchange agreement based on the SAARC exchange rate, allowing the MMA to draw up to approximately US\$200 million from the Reserve Bank of India.

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

Year	Total Exports to Maldives	Total Imports from Maldives	Total Trade
2013	154.00	12.30	156.30
2014	170.60	2.90	173.50
2015	225.82	3.00	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	241.90	3.33	245.23
2021	317.35	5.94	323.29
2022	495.40	6.42	501.82
2023	543.83	5.14	548.97
2024 (till Feb'24)	84.69	0.7	85.4

(Source: Maldives Customs Service)

Tourism

The Maldivian economy is largely dependent on tourism, which is a major source of foreign exchange and government revenue. Tourism directly accounts for about one-third of the Maldives' GDP, and directly accounts for the majority of GDP. In terms of direct employment, tourism accounts for more than one-third of employment in the Maldives. If relevant, tourism's contribution to total employment (direct and indirect) will increase to approximately 70%. India is the fifth largest source of tourist arrivals to the Maldives, with a market share of approximately 6.1% (over 90,474 visitors). However, in 2019, India moved up to second place with almost double the number of arrivals in 2018. From 2021 to 2023, India will also become the largest tourism destination India will account for more than 291,000, 241,000 and 209,000 with a market share of 23%, 14.4% and 11.1% respectively. More than 1 million Indian tourists have visited India since 2019. In March 2022, India and the Maldives agreed on an open skies plan that will further enhance connectivity between the two countries. Tourism data for Indian visitors to the Maldives in 2024 shows a significant decline, largely influenced by diplomatic tensions between the two countries. Between January and March 2024, Indian tourist arrivals decreased by 38% compared to the same period in 2023, dropping from over 56,000 to approximately 34,847 visitors. This decline is attributed to the "India Out" campaign and the subsequent "Boycott Maldives" trend in India, following derogatory comments from Maldivian ministers about Indian Prime Minister Modi

India-Maldives Relations: New challenges

India-Maldives relations have traditionally been marked by close diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties, reflecting shared historical links and common strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. The strategic partnership is crucial for regional security, trade, and maritime cooperation, especially given both countries' proximity to major international sea routes and their shared goal of maintaining peace and stability in the region. However, the relationship faces emerging challenges, including shifts in the geopolitical landscape and internal political dynamics in the Maldives.

Key Pillars of India-Maldives Strategic Partnership

- 1. Security Cooperation:** India has long been a security provider for the Maldives, assisting with military training, disaster relief, and maritime security. The Indian Navy, for instance, regularly patrols Maldivian waters to ensure the safety of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and has provided crucial support during natural disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2. Economic and Developmental Assistance:** India is one of the Maldives' largest development partners, providing grants and concessional loans for infrastructure, healthcare, and other essential projects. Initiatives like the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP) and housing projects demonstrate India's commitment to Maldivian development, contributing to socio-economic stability.
- 3. Tourism and Trade:** Tourism is vital to the Maldivian economy, and India has been one of the top sources of tourists. Increased air connectivity and visa-free travel agreements have further strengthened this sector. Bilateral trade, though limited, is growing, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, textiles, and food products.
- 4. Environmental Cooperation:** The Maldives, as a low-lying island nation, is highly vulnerable to climate change, and both countries have committed to working on climate action initiatives, including sustainable tourism and renewable energy projects.

Emerging Challenges in India-Maldives Relations

- 1. Geopolitical Competition in the Indian Ocean:** The rising influence of external powers, especially China, poses a challenge to India-Maldives relations. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to an increased Chinese presence in the Maldives, which has raised concerns in India about potential strategic encirclement. While Maldives has attempted to balance relations with both India and China, the growing Chinese footprint could challenge India's traditionally strong influence.
- 2. Political Dynamics within the Maldives:** Political shifts in the Maldives impact its foreign policy, with different administrations oscillating between pro-India and pro-China stances. Pro-India policies face domestic opposition at times, especially from parties emphasizing sovereignty issues. This internal dynamic introduces unpredictability into the bilateral relationship.
- 3. Maritime Security Concerns:** The Indian Ocean is seeing increased incidents of piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking. For India and the Maldives, ensuring maritime security and countering these threats require coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure development for maritime surveillance.
- 4. Environmental and Climate Threats:** Rising sea levels and extreme weather events are a direct existential threat to the Maldives, and they also impact India. Both countries face the challenge of funding and implementing large-scale adaptation and mitigation measures. India's support for the Maldives' climate resilience can be a unifying factor, but the pressure for swift action remains high.

India-Maldives relations are positioned as a vital strategic partnership in the Indian Ocean, shaped by mutual security, economic, and environmental interests. The challenges posed by regional competition, domestic political dynamics, and climate change will require both countries to work closely, engaging in multilateral forums and strengthening bilateral mechanisms to safeguard their shared interests in a stable and prosperous Indian Ocean region.

Recommendations

The India-Maldives relationship is vital for regional stability and strategic cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Below are key recommendations to strengthen this partnership and ensure strategic synergy:

1. Strengthen Maritime Security Cooperation

- Joint Patrols and Naval Exercises:** Expand maritime surveillance and joint naval exercises to counter piracy, illegal fishing, and other maritime threats.
- Capacity Building:** Provide technical and material support to enhance the Maldives' maritime capabilities, including patrol vessels, training, and radar systems.
- Information Sharing:** Develop secure and real-time channels for sharing maritime data to track suspicious activities.

2. Economic and Developmental Collaboration

- Infrastructure Development:** Enhance Indian investment in Maldives' infrastructure, including ports, airports, and renewable energy projects.
- Blue Economy Initiatives:** Collaborate on sustainable exploitation of marine resources and eco-tourism.
- Aid and Grants:** Continue providing financial aid for Maldives' socio-economic projects, focusing on climate resilience.

3. Climate Change and Environmental Cooperation

- **Joint Research and Action Plans:** Develop climate-resilient infrastructure and jointly address rising sea levels, which pose a significant threat to the Maldives.
- **Renewable Energy Projects:** Promote solar, wind, and ocean energy initiatives to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.
- **Disaster Management:** Strengthen cooperation in disaster preparedness and mitigation efforts.

4. Cultural and People-to-People Ties

- **Tourism Collaboration:** Facilitate easier visa processes and promote bilateral tourism campaigns.
- **Educational and Skill Development:** Offer scholarships and training programs for Maldivian students and professionals.
- **Media and Cultural Exchange:** Encourage cultural programs and media collaborations to deepen mutual understanding.

5. Regional and Multilateral Engagement

- **Leverage SAARC and IORA:** Use regional platforms like SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) to promote joint initiatives.
- **Bilateral Mechanisms:** Establish a regular high-level dialogue mechanism to review progress and address emerging challenges.
- **Counterbalance External Influence:** Proactively counter external actors' influence, ensuring that Indian interests and regional autonomy are maintained.

6. Digital and Technological Partnership

- **Digital Infrastructure:** Collaborate on IT infrastructure development and cybersecurity.
- **Health Cooperation:** Expand telemedicine and e-health services.
- **Skill Transfer:** Provide expertise in advanced technologies like AI, blockchain, and green tech.

7. Strategic Alignments

- **Defense Agreements:** Formalize agreements for enhanced military cooperation, including logistics and training.
- **Strategic Connectivity:** Develop transshipment hubs and enhance connectivity for trade routes in the Indian Ocean.
- **Soft Diplomacy:** Leverage cultural, linguistic, and historical ties for deeper strategic trust.

Implementing these recommendations would ensure a robust, mutually beneficial partnership while addressing security, development, and environmental challenges in the Indian Ocean region.

CONCLUSION

India-Maldives relations represent a cornerstone of strategic and regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Anchored in shared historical ties, geographical proximity, and mutual interests, the partnership has evolved to address contemporary challenges such as maritime security, economic development, climate change, and counterterrorism. India's "Neighborhood First" and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrines

underscore its commitment to fostering stability and growth in the Maldives and the broader Indian Ocean region. Meanwhile, the Maldives' "India First" policy has further cemented bilateral ties, ensuring collaboration in areas like defense, disaster management, and connectivity. However, the dynamic geopolitical environment necessitates sustained diplomatic engagement to mitigate external influences and internal political fluctuations. As both nations continue to deepen their strategic synergy, this partnership is poised to contribute significantly to regional stability, ensuring peace, prosperity, and security in the Indian Ocean. Strengthened by mutual respect and shared aspirations, the India-Maldives relationship will likely remain pivotal in shaping the region's future.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Ravinder, G. & Kamalakar, G. (2025). Strategic Synergy in the Indian Ocean: India-Maldives Relations. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(1), 011-019. DIP: 18.02.002/20251001, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1001002