



Assessing the India-Maldives relationship under India's Neighbourhood First Policy: Strategic, political, and economic dimensions

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Abstract

The paper is a critical study on the changing nature of relations between India and Maldives in the context of the Neighbourhood First policy of India, in strategic, political, and economic contexts. The Maldives is a major maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and as such, it plays an important role in the geostrategic choices of India, as far as the region is concerned. The paper examines how India has adjusted its foreign policy to strengthen bilateral relationship by offering more developmental aid to the country, investing in its infrastructure, and engaging in strategic cooperation, particularly to the growing Chinese influence in the Maldives. Politically, it examines the changes in Maldivian leadership and how this affects bilateral relations with a specific emphasis on the swinging between India-first and China-leaning policies. On the economic front, the paper examines the key Indian-financed initiatives and how trade, tourism, and connectivity can enhance bilateral interaction.

Keywords: India-Maldives relations, neighbourhood first policy, india's foreign policy, strategic partnership, political cooperation

Introduction

India and the Maldives have a historical, cultural, economic and strategic relationship which has existed over a long period. The two countries are geographically neighboring and have always had friendly and cooperative relations since the Maldives got its independence against the British rule in 1965 and India was one of the first countries to recognise the sovereignty of Malé and fostered diplomatic ties during the same year (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024) ^[10]. Hundreds of years of historical contacts between cultures and people have existed between the Maldivian archipelago and the southern coast of India, which are characterized by historical trade, migration, and religious interaction (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024) ^[10]. India has been instrumental in assisting the Maldives in the development and security requirements of the country since independence, and the relationship has been quite good in the domain of diplomatic, economical, and strategic matters (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024) ^[10]. India has often been the first responder when there is a crisis in Maldivian politics or natural calamities. Another defining event in the bilateral relations was the timely military intervention of India in an attempted coup in 1988, when the Indian armed forces dragged the Maldivian government back on its feet, reinforcing trust and strategic partnership between the two governments (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024) ^[10].

That the Neighbourhood First Policy of India, as it is officially stated following the election of a new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in 2014, highlights the importance of the Indian policy to place particular emphasis on strengthening the relationships with the immediate neighbours, including the Maldives. The policy indicates that New Delhi is looking forward to advancing regional integration, maintaining peace and stability in South Asia, and having mutually advantageous partnerships with its neighbours by means of constructive diplomacy, economic growth, and capacity building (Kumar, 2025; the Ministry of External Affairs, 2024) ^[7, 10]. Owing to its strategic

location in the Indian Ocean and its past relations with India, the Maldives is central to this policy framework and bilateral cooperation in maritime security and regional stability in the region is critical (Kumar, 2025) ^[7].

The fundamental aspects of Neighbourhood First Policy in India are the realisation that a healthy and serene neighbourhood would be key to the development and security of India. The policy focuses on supporting the countries in the region, such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, with political assistance, economic relations, and humanitarianism to foster stability and mutual development (Aryal & Bharti, 2023) ^[1]. New Delhi has tried to strengthen the ties between the region through infrastructure development and energy cooperation to health, education, and disaster relief through initiatives such as India Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement, hydroelectric cooperation with Bhutan, COVID 19 vaccine diplomacy, and extensive capacity building programmes at the region (Aryal and Bharti, 2023) ^[1]. Other maritime neighbours like the Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles have also been put at the forefront of the Neighbourhood First strategy, with India extending its strategic outreach to include defence alliances, economic assistance as well as maritime security collaboration. Such mechanisms as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and multilateral security exercises, such as MILAN and Ekuverin, can be used to describe how India tries to create a free, open, and rules based maritime order and manage the presence of extra regional powers like China (Aryal and Bharti, 2023; Drishti IAS, 2024) ^[1, 4, 13].

The Maldives has a very strategic location in the Indian Ocean, being close to key international sea routes that can facilitate a large percentage of the global shipping trade. It is located in strategic locations, such as important sea lines of communication (SLOCs), which makes it significant in terms of trade, energy security, and naval supremacy (Drishti IAS, 2024) ^[4]. With world powers continuing to wage power struggles on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR),

the Maldives with its geographic location is a key interest node of the region, both economically and strategically. The Maldives is politically a crucial measure of the regional balance of power, especially as strategic competition between India and China intensifies, where India perceives the Maldives as a strategic partner as it pursues its Neighbourhood First and Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) policies, and China is investing in the Maldives as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to create strategic encirclements and regional vulnerability (Aryal and Bharti, 2023; Drishti IAS, 2024) ^[1, 4, 13] Therefore, the Maldives has become a micro-world of more significant geopolitical conflicts in Indo Pacific which represents how regional policies and great power politics converge in modern foreign politics.

The internal politics of Maldives has a big regional implication. The foreign policy orientation of the Malé foreign policy tends to change with the change of leadership in the country either towards India or China or a moderate stance based on an incumbent government (Rizvi, 2020; Brewster, 2018) ^[2]. Being a small island state, the Maldives is also practicing agency that allows it to receive investment, aid, and diplomatic attention of various partners due to its potential to shape regional dynamics regardless of the external influence (Pant, 2019; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11, 12]. The Maldives contributes significantly to the regional plans to solve maritime security, counter-terrorism, disaster management, and climate change. It is a key player in local and global climate policy, enforcing sustainable use and global collaboration to safeguard the small island states because it is vulnerable to the increase in sea levels (Kugelman, 2021; Bhatta, 2019) ^[5, 8]. Membership in local institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and SAARC indicates that the Maldives was actively involved in the formation of regional policies and in the development of joint strategies to deal with maritime governance, economic development, and security issues (Brewster, 2018; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[2, 11].

Literature Review

Several scholars and policy analysts have discussed India Maldives relations through various scientific perspectives with the focus on the dynamics of bilateral relations in relation to changing regional and global forces.

C. Raja Mohan (2018) ^[9] identifies the strategic drivers of the Indian interest in the Maldives, especially following the increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He points out that the Neighbourhood First policy has been a urgent reaction to the geopolitical changes in the area, and that the intensification of defence and infrastructure associations involving the Maldives by India is an indication of a revision of its sea security policy.

A study of the strategic rivalry between Aryal and Droop (2024) ^[13] offers an analysis of the Indian and Chinese strategic competition in the Maldives. They stress that transparency and local needs have been in the attempts of India to provide a development model although China has invested hugely in the BRI. The authors observe that India has concentrated on high-impact community initiatives and speedy execution systems which emphasize the efforts that it has made to offset the role that China has played by its use of soft power and strategic assistance.

David Brewster (2014) ^[3] discusses the wider topic of Indo-Pacific relationships and how the smaller island states such

as the Maldives are involved in the politics of power in the region. He points out that this concern of India on sovereignty, debt diplomacy, and strategic encirclements has brought in a more aggressive and long lasting involvement with its island neighbors, including the Maldives. Another point that Brewster makes is that India faces the problem of influence that cannot result in a nationalistic backlash.

Shivamurthy (2025) ^[6] in their article on the neighborhood diplomacy of India claim that the Neighbourhood First policy is the transition to bilateralism instead of multilateralism. Among the instruments of gaining goodwill in the Maldives that they note are India Line of credit, development grants, and rapid response in cases of crisis. They however, warn that these should be institutionalized to ensure that they are effective in the long run.

Aparna Pande (2017) ^[14] highlights the historical relationship between India and the Maldives in terms of internal stability such as Operation Cactus in 1988. She affirms that Maldives is still dependent on India regarding both politics and economy, but India should acknowledge that the Maldives are becoming increasingly an international agency state. Pande suggests a more dynamic and versatile solution that considers the interest of the Maldives in diversifying its foreign policy.

Thakur (2023) ^[15] discusses the India influence perception in the Maldives as a Maldivian scholar. He observes that there is a growing apprehension amongst certain quarters of the society on sovereignty and strategic independence even though Indian development aid is appreciated. His study accentuates the necessity to enhance the quality of the public diplomacy and community-outreach by the Indian agencies in order to combat the misinformation and establish the mutual confidence.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the strategic, political, and economic aspects of the relations between India and Maldives within the framework of Neighbourhood First Policy.
2. To determine the extent to which India and the Maldives are engaging in regional politics to reverse any outside forces such as China.
3. To compare the efficacy of the policy instruments of India to enhance bilateral cooperation and secure mutual development.
4. To analyze how the Maldivian is reacting to Indian regional proposals and the consequences of such a reaction on sovereignty and autonomy in foreign policy.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of the Neighbourhood First Policy by India on its bilateral relationship with Maldives?
2. How has the Maldives assisted or opposed the Indian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean?
3. How does an increasing Indian involvement in the Maldives play out politically, economically and security wise?
4. What is the comparison between the approach adopted by India and the other actors like China in the Maldives?

India's Neighbourhood First Policy: An Overview

Neighbourhood First Policy is a strategic initiative of foreign policy of India that is meant to help enhance the relationship of India with its neighbors in South Asia. The

policy was formally introduced in 2014 under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and focuses on regional cooperation, connectivity, economic integration, and security cooperation with the neighboring countries, which include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Pant, 2019; Brewster, 2018) ^[2, 12]. The main aim will be to establish a harmonious, stable and prosperous neighborhood that will facilitate the growth of India besides securing the region in terms of security and stability. The policy focuses on diplomatic initiatives, developmental relationships, capacity-building, and people-to-people relationships as regional instruments of influence (Mishra and Sen, 2022; Kugelman, 2021) ^[5, 11].

Although the Neighbourhood First concept was officially declared during the Modi regime, the nature of neighbourhood diplomacy is an old aspect of the Indian foreign policy. In the tenure of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, regional orientation in India became idealistic and subsequently, regional leadership. This was changed in the 1990s as economic diplomacy was adopted under Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee where an emphasis was made on regional economic integration and trade. The Manmohan Singh administration also paid more attention to connectivity, energy cooperation and regional capacity-building projects. The policy enjoyed a political presence and consistency at an unprecedented level under Modi, with a vigorous and active outreach, including visiting South Asian capitals early in his term, inviting the heads of the SAARC countries to his swearing-in, and focusing on developmental and security collaboration (Pant, 2019; Brewster, 2018; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[2, 11, 12].

The Neighbourhood First Policy is of significant importance to the South Asian nations, with a large number of which having historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious connections with India. These nations are strategic and vital as well as very important in terms of trade, energy, and connectivity. India aims to offset outside forces, and in this regard, China has been increasing its presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or by enhancing stability and mutual growth (Kugelman, 2021; Bhatta, 2019) ^[5, 8]. The policy is also concerned with solving regional problems like terrorism, natural disasters, environmental issues and economic imbalances. By so doing, India presents itself as an ally and a regional power that promotes sovereignty, economic growth, and strategic autonomy of its neighbours (Pant, 2019; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11, 12].

Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, location relative to the southwestern coast of India, and its role in maritime security of the region places the Maldives in the middle of India Neighbourhood First Policy. Traditionally, India has played an important role in the development and security of the Maldives, as it has always been quick to respond to political crises, natural disasters, and pandemics (Brewster, 2018; Pant, 2019) ^[2, 12]. Through the presidency of Ibrahim Solih (2018-2023), the bilateral relationship got stronger, with his government matching almost with the Indian policy vision. India has funded large-scale infrastructural, health, and capacity-building projects in the Maldives, such as the Greater Malé Connections Project and defense engagement projects (Brewster, 2018; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[2, 11]. Maldives has continued to be an Indian strategic and diplomatic centre in the Indian Ocean even under the current president Mohamed Muizzu who initially took a more

cautious stance towards India. By allying with the Maldives, India will aim to achieve maritime stability, combat Chinese strategic hegemony and enforce its dominance as the main security provider in the area (Kugelman, 2021; Bhatta, 2019) ^[5, 8].

Strategic Dimension of India-Maldives Relations

The Maldives has geostrategic importance as it is located in the middle of the Indian Ocean and is near the key shipping lanes in the world which are used by international trade and energy. The archipelago which contains approximately 1200 islands spanning a wide maritime area is located in close proximity to key Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) along the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Dominating or dominating the Maldives offers any power a strategic edge in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and thus an important actor in regional geopolitics of the seas (Pant, 2019; Brewster, 2018) ^[2, 12]. In the case of India, it is critical to retain close relationships with the Maldives to sustain the security structure in the IOR and free and open movement of the waters (Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11].

The maritime security interests of India in the Indian Ocean have been based on protecting the trade routes, secure energy supply, preventing maritime threats like piracy and terrorism and countering military external influence. Because of its closeness to the southwestern coast of India and its location through major SLOCs, the Maldives can be used as a frontline component in the maritime security policy of India. It is also within the rubric of India vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) that would expand maritime collaboration in the region. India, by establishing its relations with Maldives, aims to ensure that nothing hostile in its strategic backyard and strengthening its role as the net security provider in the Indian Ocean (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019; Brewster, 2018) ^[2, 16].

The Indian Maldives have entered into a strong defence and security alliance. A particularly noticeable feature of this collaboration is the shared military drill called Ekuverin, which has been taking place on the basis of annual repetitions since 2009, and which is devoted to the anti-insurgency and anti-terrorist activities in the city and semi-city landscape. India has also helped Maldives in implementation of coastal radar systems in order to improve Maritime domain awareness so that it can be real-time surveying and monitoring of its large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Also, India has been supportive in conducting hydrographic surveys of the Maldivian waters which are critical in safe navigation, marine resource management, and strategic planning. India also provides military equipment and drills to Maldivian armies, which strengthen bilateral military relations and strategic partnership (Brewster, 2018; Lim and Mukherjee, 2019) ^[2, 16].

India has strongly supported the strengthening of the counter-terrorism and maritime surveillance efforts of the Maldives. Considering that the Maldives is susceptible to radicalization, and its strategic location in the sea, India has provided Maldivian security agents with intelligence-sharing systems and counter-terrorism training. Joint patrols with the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), backed maritime surveillance efforts, and the provision of technical skills in monitoring illegal maritime operations, such as the smuggling of arms, illegal drugs, and illegal people trafficking have been conducted by the Indian Navy

and Coast Guard. The use of Indian helicopters and a Dornier maritime surveillance airplane in the Maldives has been very instrumental in enhancing the air and sea surveillance systems in the country (Brewster, 2018; Lim and Mukherjee, 2019) ^[2, 16].

The increasing economic and strategic presence of China in the Maldives especially under the leadership of the previous President Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018) was of concern in New Delhi. The Chinese investments in mass infrastructure such as the Sinamale Bridge and port development as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were seen as a component of its String of Pearls concept of surrounding India (Kugelman, 2021; Bhatta, 2019) ^[5, 8]. India reacted by refocusing its strategy by strengthening its developmental and defence relationship with the Maldives, through high-impact community development initiatives, and through concessional credit lines and expedited implementation of infrastructure projects like the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP). Also, India has further sought to strengthen regional maritime cooperation programs and revised its promise to be the net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (Pant, 2019; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11, 12]. Although the strategic competition with China continues, the active policy of India aims at maintaining its influence and keeping the Maldives on the same page as the Indian security structure.

Political aspect of the India Maldives relations.

The Maldives and India have a strong history of good will, geographic positioning, and strategic interests that have led to the close diplomatic ties between the two countries. Since 1965, when the two countries established diplomatic relations, the two countries have continued to have consistent high level interactions, which has strengthened the political and developmental relations between the countries. Such interactions have featured state visits, combined statements, and bilateral agreements in the areas of defence, development, health and education (Brewster, 2018; Pant, 2019) ^[2, 12]. In June 2019, the Maldives was visited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the first overseas outing of his post-re-election tenure, and demonstrates the importance of the Maldives to India in its Neighbourhood First policy. Similarly, Maldivian leaders like President Ibrahim Solih, President Mohamed Muizzu have also visited India at other times, thus there has been continuity in political dialogue despite tension in some cases. These trips can be used to renew strategic confidence and to open up the possibilities of bilateral collaboration in various areas (Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11].

The Indian-Maldives relations have been directly influenced by domestic political development in Maldives. Alterations to leadership usually trigger a redefinition of foreign policy. When President Abdulla Yameen assumed office (2013-2018), relations with India were tense due to the increasing proximity of the Maldives to China and the risk of strategic disparity and the lack of transparency in foreign investments (Kugelman, 2021; Bhatta, 2019) ^[5, 9]. On the other hand, the election of President Ibrahim Solih in 2018 was characterized by a revival of pro-India feeling, which places India as an important development and security ally. More recently, the administration of President Mohamed Muizzu has been following an aggressive pro-Maldives policy, with such efforts as the India Out campaign (demanding the expulsion of Indian military men in the country). Although

this movement is politically motivated and nationalistic in undertones, it has made bilateral defence cooperation tricky in some aspects. However, the institutional relationships have not been diminished, and India has kept talking to the Maldives to overcome these issues at the diplomatic level (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019; Brewster, 2018) ^[2, 16].

India has been a major forces in addressing political stabilization in the Maldives, as a responsible regional partner whenever a crisis occurs. One of such historic incidences was in 1988 when India rapidly stepped in to avert a coup attempt on President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and this showed its concern with the stability of the region (Brewster, 2018; Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[2, 11]. India has more recently been a participant in the democratic transition of 2018, when president Abdulla Yameen was ousted as an indicator of authoritarianism and judicial overreach (Rizvi, 2020). Goodwill and trust were also strengthened by India rendering significant support to the COVID-19 pandemic, which serves as a way of showing vulnerability. In recent years, India has portrayed itself as a stabilizer through the regular development assistance, budget support, and strategic forbearance to aid democratic institutions, constitutional governance, and the national sovereignty in the Maldives (Pant, 2019) ^[12].

India and the Maldives are close partners in several regional and multi-lateral organizations e.g. South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and Bay of Bengal Initiative Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). These platforms offer platforms of discussion and cooperation on shared issues like climate change, disaster risk reduction, maritime security, and regional connectivity (Bhatta, 2019) ^[8]. Although there has not been much activity by SAARC because of geopolitical tension especially between India and Pakistan, other organizations such as IORA have grown to prominence. India has its vision of the rules based order of the Indian Ocean, and the Maldives became a formal IORA member in 2019 (Kugelman, 2021) ^[5]. Through these forums, the Maldives gains more international attention, and this is one way the Maldives supports the Indian efforts towards regional integration and a secure maritime environment.

Economic Dimension of India- Maldives Relations

The years spent have seen trade and economic relations between India and the Maldives increase steadily, with India being one of the major trading partners of the Maldives. India is a major exporter of a variety of commodities that are essential such as food goods, drugs, construction materials, petroleum products, and consumer goods, and the Maldives is a major exporter of marine products and garment to India (Brewster, 2018; Kugelman, 2021) ^[2, 5]. Despite the fact that the volume of the trade is still low in comparison with global trade of India, it is of great importance in the Maldivian economy that is closely dependent on imports. Maldivian projects have attracted the interest of Indian companies (mainly in the construction, telecommunications, and finance sectors), which create jobs and add to the economic growth (Pant, 2019) ^[12].

India has also been a constant development partner of the Maldives, which offers both grants, concessional loans and lines of credit. These aid packages favor infrastructural, health, educational, water and sanitation, and renewable energy projects (Mishra and Sen, 2022) ^[11]. India is one

such example as it announced a financial package of USD 1.4 billion in 2018 to support its budgetary needs and development agenda in the Maldives. Moreover, India has given communities development grants that directly contribute to the availability of healthcare, education, and community utilities. India also promotes long term bilateral cooperation by developing human resource and capacity building through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program and ICCR scholarships (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019)^[16].

The support of large-scale infrastructural development can be regarded as one of the most interesting facets of the Indian economic involvement in the Maldives. One of them is the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP) which is the largest development project in the Maldives funded by a USD 100 million grant and USD 400 million line of credit. The construction of a 6.74 km bridge and causeway between Malé and neighboring islands is part of the project that will greatly increase the connectivity and economic integration of all the islands and access to the necessary services (Brewster, 2018; Mishra and Sen, 2022)^[2, 11]. India too has contributed to the development of ports, expansion of airports, housing schemes as well as the road networks in the different atolls. These programs both spur the growth of the economy but they unify India into soft power and goodwill in the Maldivian population (Pant, 2019)^[12].

India and the Maldives have been extensively working in areas of tourism, healthcare, and capacity building. The Indian market is a significant source of Maldivian tourism and the Indian tourists have always featured on the list of the largest tourists visiting the archipelago. India has assisted in provision of medical facilities, medical personnel deployment, and provision of necessary medicine and vaccines in the healthcare sector. The case of the COVID-19 pandemic and the initiative named Vaccine Maitri by India in which India delivered vaccines and medical supplies to the Maldives, has shown that India was a reliable health partner (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019)^[16]. Also, hundreds of Maldivian students enjoy scholarships to attend Indian schools, professionals get training in Indian centers of excellence through capacity-building programs, developing human resource in the long run and enhancing the people-to-people relationships.

India has also been instrumental in offering important financial aid when there is a time of economic hardship. A good example here is the currency swap agreement of the SAARC framework, which allows the Maldives to stabilise foreign exchange reserves, and control instances of liquidity crises. However, in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, India granted USD 250 million of the budgetary support to the Maldivian government and transferred medical supplies, vaccines, and food assistance. This act of assistance in a timely manner has strengthened the image of India as a trusted partner, and is able to provide the Maldives with economic shock weathering brought about by the failure of tourism and international trade. These financial instruments continue to play an important role in the Indian economic diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region (Brewster, 2018; Kugelman, 2021)^[2, 5].

Challenges in the India-Maldives Relations

The emergence of anti-India feeling especially in the form of the “India out movement has been one of the biggest recent issues in India-Maldives relations. This movement

which demanded the departure of the Indian military personnel and chastised alleged Indian influence in the Maldivian internal matters was spearheaded by certain political factions and increased by social media (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019; Brewster, 2018)^[2, 16]. This movement took off during the tenure of President Mohamed Muizzu who stressed national sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Although the Indian officials have mostly seen the need to hold back, this political drama has been a cause of negative publicity and diplomatic delicacies. Otherwise, these feelings may restrain the extent of the Indian involvement and hinder the collaboration in matters including defence, infrastructure, and capacity-building in the long run (Pant, 2019)^[12].

There is also increasing strategic and economic rivalry of the Maldives between India and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. In the Maldives, under president Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), the country officially became part of the BRI and signed several infrastructure deals with the Chinese companies, which have included bridges, housing and port projects (Kugelman, 2021)^[5]. Although these programs have helped in the development of Maldives, they have also raised some issues in terms of increasing debt and the eventual debt trap diplomacy. Judged by its growing presence in the Maldives, and in the Indian Ocean Region more generally, India regards China as a challenge to its historic zone of interest, as well as to its traditional maritime security. It is a sensitive issue that Indian diplomacy needs to balance such competition and still consider the Maldivian sovereignty. The model of development in India that focused on grants, projects with quick impact, and use of concessional financing has remained in competition with the other country of development models that focus on the push of infrastructure in the archipelago which is heavily funded and has strategic ambitions (Brewster, 2018; Lim and Mukherjee, 2019)^[2, 16].

Although Indian assistance to the Maldives has been a very effective factor in developing the nation and improving security, it has raised the concern of over-dependency and loss of sovereignty in Malé. Certain Maldivian political elites and civil societies have contended that the high level of Indian participation in defence and infrastructural development such as the availability of Indian officials and Indian equipment could limit the ability of the country to make autonomous choices (Brewster, 2018; Pant, 2019)^[2, 12]. To India, such cooperation is informed by the need to work together based on mutual agreement, strategic imperative and common interests related to regional security. The most important task is to balance the perception and make the bilateral agreements transparent and reliable. The focus on a story of cooperation instead of charity is a key to maintaining the goodwill in the long run and reducing the backlash in the context of the political changes in the Maldives (Lim and Mukherjee, 2019)^[16].

Maldives is also very susceptible to climate change where there are threats of the rise of sea-level, coastal erosion and extreme weather conditions. Despite supporting environmental programs, such as solar energy projects and disaster resilience programs, India still needs to incorporate climate cooperation as the key aspect of bilateral interactions (Kugelman, 2021)^[5]. The lack of a long-term and coordinated approach to dealing with the environmental issues can undermine the developmental collaboration and indirectly affect the stability in the region and maritime

security, which is the area of mutual interest. Enhanced collaboration in sustainable development, blue economy programs, and climate resilience is thus vital towards dealing with this new challenge as well as strengthening India- Maldives strategic and developmental relationships.

Conclusion

The relationship between India and the Maldives has a historical, geographical, cultural, and strategic background. The two countries have formed a comprehensive relationship over the decades and this partnership was multifaceted in political, economical, security, and people-to-people aspects. The Maldives geographic position in the middle of the Indian Ocean is what makes it a main actor in the Indian maritime policy and the regional relations. The ongoing interaction of India with the Maldives shows that it values stability and security in the immediate environment, which is in line with Neighbourhood First policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) policy. At the political level, the relationship has been characterized by co-operation as well as tension that has been occasioned by changes in the domestic leadership in the Maldives. Where pro-India leaders such as President Ibrahim Solih have sought a pro-India course, other leaders have aimed to realign foreign policy towards putting sovereignty and national interest first, occasionally leading to anti-India rhetoric, e.g. President Mohamed Muizzu. Nonetheless, India has been able to react with a mature and diplomatic approach and has been able to stay on course through its involvement with Malé and to reassure it of being a reliable and responsible partner.

India has become an economic development ally, providing India with grants, low-interest loans and other technical advice on major infrastructural projects such as the transformative Greater Malé Connectivity Project. The bilateral economic partnership is also significant through trade, tourism, health care collaboration as well as capacity-building efforts. The timely financial aid of India in crises, including the COVID-19 crisis, supported its image of a dependable neighbor that can be relied upon by the Maldives when it is in need.

India and Maldives work hand in hand in the security sphere regarding counter-terrorism matters, maritime surveillance and defence training. The Maldivian National Defence Force is built up through joint exercises including Ekuverin, coastal radar systems and hydrographic surveys, which strengthens the operational security of the sea along the region. The Indian action to counter foreign interference, especially by China under the banner of the Belt and Road is an indication of its strategic intention to stay the major security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. Nonetheless, this competition has also complicated the endeavors of India to ensure that it influences and does not seem to be domineering.

There are also challenges to the bilateral relationship that need a subtle and futuristic response. The increasing anti-India feelings, issues of sovereignty and rivalry with China need to be tackled by open communication, public diplomacy and moderate engagement. In addition to this, the climate change has been a common challenge that requires collective approaches to resilience, adaptation, and environmental sustainability. India has to be more supportive to Maldives in totality in areas of defence and

infrastructure but also in areas of green energy, climate financing, and sustainable development.

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