



# Restoring The Balance

This article is related to General Studies-  
Paper II (International Relations).

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## India must remain invested in strengthening democratic institutions in the Maldives.

Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's three-day visit to India this week seems to have brought a tumultuous phase in India-Maldives ties to a close. This is Mr. Solih's first overseas visit after becoming the President of the Indian Ocean nation of 400,000 people. He defeated Abdulla Yameen in a surprise victory in the Maldivian presidential elections in September and, since then, has recalibrated his country's ties with India. While Mr. Yameen had drawn the Maldives closer to China and brutally crushed the Opposition, Mr. Solih's victory has been a shot in the arm for those who favour strengthening democratic forces in the island nation.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had attended the swearing-in ceremony of Mr. Solih as the President of Maldives in November, his first visit to the nation as Prime Minister and the first by an Indian head of state since 2011. Even as Mr. Modi enthusiastically reached out to all of India's neighbours after his election in 2014, he remained reluctant to engage Mr. Yameen. His planned visit to the Maldives, in March 2015, was cancelled as the political environment deteriorated under Mr. Yameen. In a strong endorsement of Mr. Solih's victory, Mr. Modi underscored that the recent elections in the Maldives represented the collective aspirations of the people for democracy, the rule of law and a prosperous future. He made it clear that India desired "to see a stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful Republic of Maldives".

### Points of engagement

Mr. Solih's India visit has seen the two sides emphasise their traditionally close bond. He called India the island nation's "closest friend" and "reaffirmed his government's 'India-First' Policy", committing to working together closely with India. India, for its part, announced a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion for the Maldives in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit. Both have agreed to ensure that they would keep other's security interests in mind as they consolidate cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). They have agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the IOR through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance. In an attempt to boost trade ties, Mr. Modi "welcomed the expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives". Areas such fisheries development, tourism, transportation, connectivity, health, education, information technology, new and renewable energy and communications were earmarked for enhancing bilateral cooperation.

### The China factor

It is important from New Delhi's perspective that Mr. Solih succeeds in the Maldives. Under Mr. Yameen, the Maldives had veered too close to China for India's comfort, welcoming Chinese money for major infrastructure projects and signing a controversial free trade agreement (FTA). India's entreaties for political moderation and closer security ties were summarily ignored. China's role in the Maldivian economy is under the scanner today amid growing concerns about the money the Maldives owes to China for infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese construction companies. These infrastructure projects include the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects Malé's eastern edge to the western corner of the island of Hulhulé. It is now estimated that China's loans to the Maldives total at least \$1.3 billion, or a quarter of the island nation's gross domestic product. Faced with this crisis, the new Maldivian government is looking to India for more budgetary support to help meet its development goals and is also planning to revise the FTA with China.

The Modi government is also trying to ensure help reaches Male in time so that New Delhi regains some of its lost space in the Maldives' foreign policy and politics. Malé has also made it clear that while the neighbourhood will clearly be a priority for the Solih government, China will continue to play an important role as an economic partner. So China is not going to disappear from the Maldivian foreign policy matrix. Nor should India expect it to. But the logic of geography dictates that India's role will be critical in determining the trajectory of political developments in the Maldives.

India's patient handling of the Maldives crisis over the last few years has positioned it well. By coordinating its response with other like-minded regional and extra-regional players, India increased the costs for Mr. Yameen and also underscored that there are options available to the Maldives should it decide to move away from China. After a meeting of the 'Quad' countries in Singapore in November, the U.S., for example, released a statement expressing support for the new Maldivian government.

### The domestic dynamic

Going forward, the Maldives would need the support of India as its challenges remain acute. The institutional fabric of the country has been battered under Mr. Yameen's assault even as the threat of Islamist extremism has grown in potency. Governance will continue to be challenging as the forces which came together to bring down Mr. Yameen may not be cohesive enough in running the nation and strengthening its democratic foundations.



India should not be deterred by temporary setbacks. Instead of perpetually viewing the dynamics from a China-centric perspective, it must keep its eyes firmly on the long term. The more invested New Delhi is in strengthening democratic institutions in its neighbourhood, the better returns it will get in its foreign policy.

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### Indo-Maldives Relations

#### Why in the discussion

- The newly elected president of Maldives Ibrahim Solih is on a three-day visit to India.
- India and Maldives have agreed to increase cooperation for maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean after the delegation level talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohammad Solih.
- With this, India will provide a loan of 1.4 billion dollars to this island country. This amount of assistance is the largest amount given by India to the Maldives.
- The two sides signed four agreements, including culture cooperation, IT and electronics cooperation, creating a better environment for agri business.

#### Background

- India has centuries-old cultural relations with the Maldives.
- New Delhi has religious, linguistic, cultural and business relations with the Maldives.
- India was among the first countries to recognize the Maldives after independence in the year 1965. Later India opened its embassy in Maldives in 1972.
- Ibrahim Solih became President of the Maldives in November 2018.
- PM Narendra Modi attended the oath taking ceremony of Ibrahim Solih. It is the first foreign visit of President Ibrahim Solih after taking charge.

#### Key facts related to the agreement

- India has also decided to give additional 1000 seats for the training and capacity building of the Maldives citizens in the next five years.
- India will also give full support to improve the connectivity between the two countries. Good connectivity will lead to the exchange of goods and services, information, ideas, culture and people.

- During the talks, both sides agreed to further strengthen security cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
- India and Maldives agreed to increase bilateral cooperation on general concerns including piracy, terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking and human trafficking.
- India invited to strengthen the participation in health, human resources development, infrastructure, agriculture, capacity building and tourism sector between two countries.
- Both the leaders agreed to increase economic cooperation in the field of fisheries, tourism, traffic, connectivity, health, education, information technology, innovative and renewable energy and communication.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the decision of the Maldives to re-join Commonwealth and welcomed the participation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

#### Indo-Maldivian Relations

- India and Maldives have been friendly and close in tactical, economic and military cooperation. India has contributed to the security of the island nation.
- The Maldives has now emerged from the category of less developed countries and has become a middle income country.
- The Government of India appreciated the assistance given to the Maldives and identified for cooperation in development of many areas including private sector involvement, water and drainage system, health facilities, education and tourism sector in home and infrastructure development.
- Maldives is a country of 1200 islands located in the Indian Ocean, which is strategically important for India. Supply of energy to China, Japan and India, through the maritime route of the Maldives continues uninterrupted.

### Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. India has relations with Maldives-

1. Religions Relations
2. Linguistic Relations
3. Cultural Relations
4. Trade Relations

Which of the above statements is/are Incorrect?

- (a) Only 4                      (b) 1 and 2  
(c) 1, 2 and 4                (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

2. Consider the following statements-

1. Recently the newly elected President of Maldives Abdulla Yamin came to India on three day visit for maintaining peace and security in Indian ocean.
2. Recently India and Maldives have signed four agreements to make the environment better for cultural cooperation, IT and Electronics cooperation, agriculture trade.



Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1                      (b) Only 2  
(c) Both 1 and 2              (d) Neither 1 nor 2

3. Consider the following statements-

1. Maldives situated in Indian ocean is a country of 1200 islands.

2. India is the first foreign visit of the newly elected President of Maldives after taking charge.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1                      (b) Only 2  
(c) Both 1 and 2              (d) Neither 1 nor 2

### Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

**Q.1:-"The relations with neighbour countries has been the main element of foreign policy of India." The improving relations of India with Maldives not only has economic importance for India but also has strategical importance. Discuss. (250 Words)**

**Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 18 Dec. is 1(c), 2 (c), 3 (b), 4 (d)**

