



Island Hopping

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

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"After repairing ties with the Maldives, New Delhi should strengthen its Indian Ocean outreach."

On his first visit abroad, to New Delhi last week, as the President of the Maldives, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih appears to have struck the right notes. In India a month after assuming his new responsibility, Mr. Solih has assured New Delhi that the Maldives is pivoting to the 'India First' policy.

The five-year-long tenure of his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, was marked by a serious deterioration in ties with India, as Mr. Yameen steadily took his nation towards authoritarianism and into a close embrace with China.

Different vision

Mr. Solih's government has adopted a different vision — one anchored in decentralised and people-centric governance. India seems to enjoy a special place in his worldview. He stressed that it is "our closest neighbour". President Ram Nath Kovind reciprocated by tweeting: "India attaches the highest importance to its relationship with Maldives." Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the only head of government present at Mr. Solih's inauguration, on November 17.

The joint statement issued during Mr. Solih's visit reflects a fine balance between the interests of both countries. To help the Maldives address its budget deficit and development challenges, India has worked out a generous \$1.4 billion assistance package. Its break-up and the period for which it is available have not been revealed yet. However, it is learnt reliably that much of the funding may be utilised for people-friendly projects in four domains: health care, education, water and sanitation.

Besides, India has offered visa facilitation that will allow Maldivians to visit India easily (with reciprocal facilities for Indian visitors to the Maldives); 1,000 "additional" training slots for the next five years; close cooperation on political and diplomatic issues; and support to the Maldives as it seeks to rejoin the Commonwealth and its entry into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). The visit resulted in the conclusion of four agreements relating to cooperation for information technology, culture, agri-business, and visa arrangements.

The new government in Male has also given assurances to be fully sensitive to India's security and strategic concerns, in the light of reports that China has gained access to one or more islands for military purposes. On the valid ground that the security interests of both countries are "interlinked", India and the Maldives have agreed to be mindful of "each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region". The two governments now plan "to enhance maritime security" in the Indian Ocean Region. The expectation in Delhi is that the Indian Navy and Coast Guard will now be able to secure better cooperation from the Maldives for coordinated patrolling, aerial surveillance and capacity building.

Besides, intelligence agencies hope to revert to nurturing better collaboration in combating terrorism and other non-traditional security challenges. This is significant, considering that radicalisation is a live issue there. A sizeable number of Maldivian young men are reported to have left to join the Islamic State in Syria.

The trade and investment facet of the bilateral relationship is of a modest nature, given the country's small population. The annual value of bilateral trade is \$200 million. India Inc., therefore, needs to be energised to increase its presence in the Maldivian market, despite the setback suffered by a private Indian firm when its contract was cancelled unceremoniously in December 2012. Mr. Solih did well by participating in a business event, hosted jointly by India's three apex industry chambers. His message was clear: the Maldives is open for business again.

Indian Ocean stakes

The deliberations in Delhi took place as China's footprint in South Asia has increased in recent years. There is a growing realisation that, owing to Beijing's strategic objectives, economic capability and assertive diplomacy, it is not feasible for India to supplant China in neighbouring countries. But India has its own advantages, assets and friends. The intention is to leverage them fully, deriving benefit from the neighbours' essential thirst for maintaining balance in their external relations.

The change in the Maldives has been followed by a re-assertion of democratic impulses in Sri Lanka, as symbolised by the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister. India enjoys close relations with Mauritius and the Seychelles. A new grouping of India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and the Seychelles, focussed on maritime security and economic development, looks attainable in the short term.

In devising a smart action plan to implement the SAGAR, or Security and Growth for All in the Region, strategy, that was announced by Mr. Modi in March 2015, New Delhi should accord equal importance to its two key goals: address its neighbours' concerns on security challenges; and harness enticing opportunities for the Blue Economy. Even others such as South Africa, whose President is due to visit India in January next year, and Kenya, much enthused from having hosted recently the first global conference on the sustainable Blue Economy, may be happy to join.



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 Soliha 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 is considering to admit Maldives into India Ocean Rim association (IORA). Regarding this consider the following statements.
 1. IORA is organisation of 20 countries.
 2. The aim of IORA is to establish among member nations business groups, educational institutions and mutual relation between people and academia and encourage it.

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:-**Analyse the multi-dimensions that came in bilateral relation between India and Maldives in recent year. How can it be beneficial to India? Discuss. **(250 Words)**

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 21 Dec. is 1(b).