

## INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS IN THE LAST 25 YEARS: A GEOSTRATEGIC ANALYSIS

**Dr. Raju Suresh Gaware**, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, H. J. Thim College of Arts and Science, Jalgaon

### Abstract:

India-Maldives relations have witnessed a complex trajectory in the last 25 years, marked by periods of close cooperation intertwined with episodes of strain. This research article offers a comprehensive geostrategic analysis of this dynamic relationship, examining its evolution through various lenses: historical linkages, economic interdependence, security cooperation, and the influence of external actors.

The study begins by tracing the historical roots of the India-Maldives partnership, emphasizing traditional ties of cultural and religious affinity. It then delves into the economic dimensions of the relationship, analyzing India's role as a major development partner and the growing economic interdependence between the two countries. The research further investigates the evolving security cooperation framework, including India's assistance in maritime security, counter-terrorism, and disaster relief.

A crucial aspect of the analysis focuses on the impact of external actors, particularly China, on the India-Maldives bilateral relationship. The increasing Chinese presence in the Maldives, driven by economic investments and infrastructure projects, has raised concerns in India, leading to heightened competition and strategic maneuvering in the region.

The study concludes by examining the future trajectory of India-Maldives relations. It highlights the challenges posed by external actors, the need for sustainable economic development in the Maldives, and the importance of strengthening people-to-people ties. The research underscores the need for India to adopt a nuanced and long-term approach to its engagement with the Maldives, prioritizing mutual respect, shared interests, and a cooperative approach to regional challenges.

**Keywords:** Geo-strategy, Bilateral Relation,

### Introduction

India and the Maldives share a long-standing and multifaceted relationship, shaped by historical, cultural, and strategic ties. Over the past 25 years, this partnership has witnessed periods of collaboration, tension, and revival, influenced by regional and global geopolitics. The strategic location of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean makes it a vital player in India's maritime security framework. Scholars such as C. Raja Mohan in *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy (2003)* have emphasized the importance of India's engagement with its maritime neighbors to safeguard its strategic interests. The evolving dynamics of India-Maldives relations are a reflection of this imperative.

The political and economic landscape of the Maldives has significantly influenced its relations with India. As highlighted by David Brewster in *India as an Asia Pacific Power*

(2012), India's regional diplomacy is often challenged by external influences and internal political instability in neighboring states, including the Maldives. This became evident during phases of authoritarianism in the Maldives and its growing ties with China.

In the realm of economic and defense cooperation, authors like Harsh V. Pant and Yogesh Joshi in *The US Pivot and Indian Foreign Policy* (2016) have underscored India's strategic investments and defense collaborations in the Indian Ocean region, including with the Maldives. India's commitment to fostering regional stability through financial assistance and defense partnerships has been pivotal in maintaining its influence.

Moreover, Aparna Pande in *From Chanakya to Modi: The Evolution of India's Foreign Policy* (2017) underscores the importance of India's neighborhood-first policy, which has guided its relations with the Maldives over the years. The shift toward a reset and revival of ties post-2018 highlights the resilience and adaptability of this relationship.

This research article explores the key phases of India-Maldives relations over the last 25 years, analyzing their geopolitical implications and strategic importance. Through an examination of historical events, policy shifts, and strategic developments, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of this evolving partnership.

## Historical Background

### Early Diplomatic Relations

The India-Maldives relationship dates back to the Maldives' independence from British rule in 1965, when India was among the first nations to recognize the Maldives as an independent state and establish diplomatic ties. This early engagement laid the groundwork for a partnership characterized by cultural, linguistic, and historical connections, as well as shared democratic values.

### Strategic Partnerships and Key Developments

In the late 1970s, the relationship deepened with the signing of the Maritime Boundary Agreement in 1979, which clarified maritime boundaries and signified a strategic partnership between the two nations. The partnership further strengthened during the 1980s, particularly during the political turbulence that culminated in the 1988 coup attempt in the Maldives. India's military intervention, known as Operation Cactus, successfully thwarted the coup and stabilized the Maldivian government, thereby solidifying India's role as a key ally in the region.

### Discussion on India-Maldives Relations in the Last 25 Years: A Geostrategic Analysis

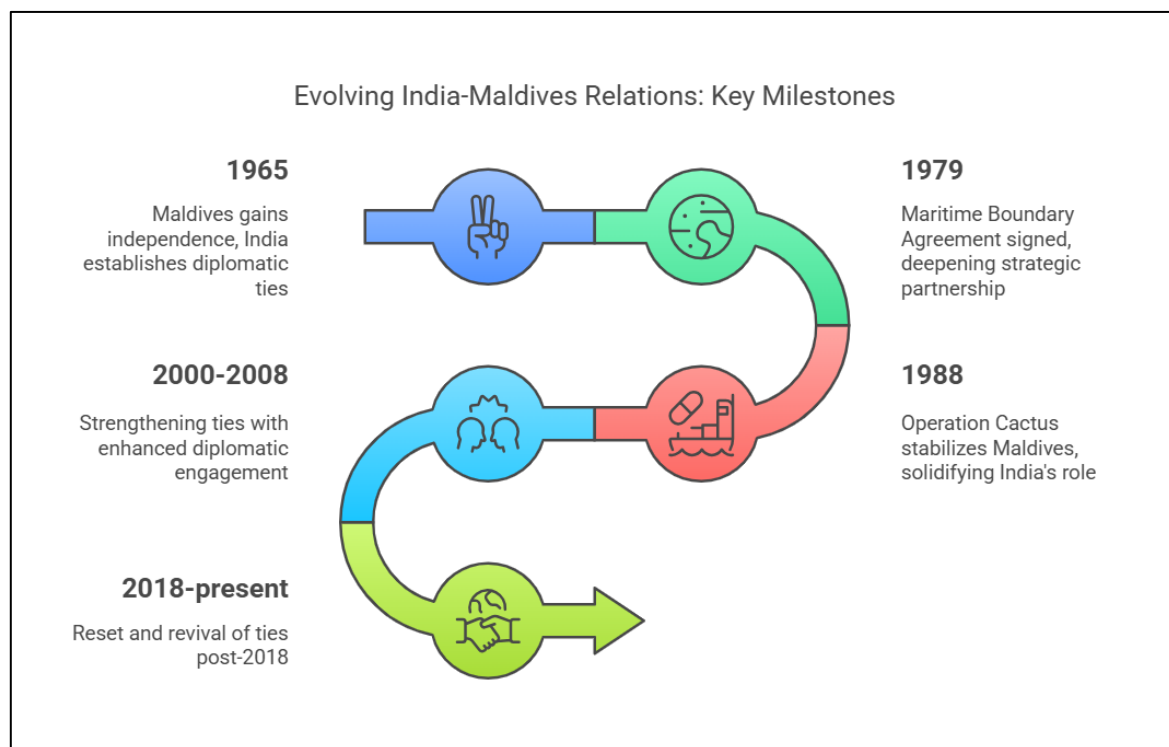
For the purpose of study, the relationship of India and Maldives in the last 25 years may be divided into the following four phases viz.

**Phase 1: Strengthening Ties (2000-2008)**

**Phase 2: Growing Concerns (2008-2013)**

**Phase 3: Tensions and Rebalancing (2013-2018)**

**Phase 4: Reset and Revival (2018-present)**



Let's discuss the above phases in details.

### Phase 1: Strengthening Ties (2000-2008)

The period from 2000 to 2008 marked a significant enhancement in diplomatic, economic, and strategic relations between India and the Maldives. While the Indo-Maldives Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed in 1976, laying the initial foundation for bilateral ties, the early 21st century witnessed more dynamic and multi-dimensional cooperation between the two nations.

#### Strengthening Diplomatic Engagement

One of the key developments during this phase was the strengthening of high-level diplomatic interactions. India maintained its role as a vital strategic partner for the Maldives, a small island nation with strategic importance in the Indian Ocean. In response to evolving regional security dynamics and mutual interests, both countries sought closer collaboration on international and regional platforms.

Maldives demonstrated its unwavering support for India's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), showcasing its diplomatic solidarity with India on global issues. This support underlined the growing political trust and shared interests between the two nations. Additionally, the Maldives consistently backed India's positions on various international issues, reinforcing their partnership on global diplomatic fronts.

#### Economic and Developmental Cooperation

Economic cooperation between India and the Maldives deepened significantly during this phase. India emerged as a key development partner, contributing to various infrastructure and capacity-building projects in the Maldives. Development assistance from India

encompassed sectors such as health, education, and transportation, aimed at bolstering the Maldives' socio-economic landscape.

One of the most notable economic initiatives during this period was India's provision of concessional loans and grants to support development projects in the Maldives. These funds were utilized to improve critical infrastructure, including road networks and healthcare facilities, fostering greater economic connectivity and stability in the island nation. Additionally, Indian private and public sector enterprises expanded their presence in the Maldives, further strengthening economic ties.

### **Strategic and Military Cooperation**

Given the Maldives' strategic location in the Indian Ocean, security cooperation was a critical dimension of bilateral relations during this phase. India provided military assistance to the Maldives, including training programs for Maldivian defense personnel and the supply of defense equipment. This support was aimed at enhancing the Maldives' maritime security capabilities and ensuring the safety of key shipping lanes in the region.

Joint military exercises and coordinated patrols were also conducted to counter piracy, smuggling, and other transnational threats. India's assistance proved invaluable during times of national crisis in the Maldives, including natural disasters and security concerns. The presence of Indian defense personnel in advisory and training roles further cemented the strategic partnership between the two nations.

The period from 2000 to 2008 marked a pivotal phase in India-Maldives relations, characterized by strengthened diplomatic engagement, enhanced economic cooperation, and strategic security collaboration. The Maldives' support for India's bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC exemplified the strong political understanding between the two countries. India's role as a reliable development and security partner laid the groundwork for continued robust relations in subsequent years.

### **Phase 2: Growing Concerns (2008-2013)**

The years from 2008 to 2013 marked a phase of evolving dynamics and emerging concerns in India-Maldives relations. While bilateral cooperation continued in various sectors, significant challenges emerged due to Maldives' growing ties with China and Pakistan, along with concerns related to rising Islamic radicalization.

### **Strengthening Ties with China and Pakistan**

During this period, Maldives deepened its diplomatic and economic engagements with China and Pakistan. China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region, coupled with its investments in infrastructure development in the Maldives, raised strategic concerns in India. The Maldives' growing alignment with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) added to India's apprehensions about losing its traditional influence in the island nation.

Similarly, Maldives' growing cooperation with Pakistan in areas such as trade, defense, and education further complicated India's strategic calculations. India viewed these developments with caution, as they had the potential to alter the regional balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

### **Security Concerns and Rising Radicalization**

One of India's primary concerns during this phase was the growing threat of Islamic radicalization in the Maldives. Reports indicated an increase in extremist ideologies and the recruitment of Maldivian youth by international terrorist organizations. Given the geographical proximity between India and the Maldives, such developments posed significant risks to regional stability and security.

India emphasized the need for counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing to address these security challenges. Diplomatic dialogues and joint initiatives were undertaken to strengthen the Maldives' capabilities in countering extremism and safeguarding regional peace.

### **Continued Economic Cooperation**

Despite strategic and security concerns, trade and economic cooperation between India and the Maldives continued to grow. India remained one of the Maldives' largest trading partners, supplying essential goods and services. Indian companies continued to invest in infrastructure, tourism, and other key sectors in the Maldives.

Development assistance from India also persisted, with several capacity-building projects and initiatives aimed at improving healthcare, education, and transportation in the Maldives. These efforts underscored India's commitment to supporting the socio-economic development of its neighbor.

The period from 2008 to 2013 highlighted both opportunities and challenges in India-Maldives relations. While economic cooperation remained a positive aspect, the growing influence of China and Pakistan and the rise of Islamic radicalization presented significant strategic concerns for India. This phase underscored the need for India to adopt a more proactive approach in maintaining its strategic foothold in the Maldives and ensuring regional stability.

### **Phase 3: Tensions and Rebalancing (2013-2018)**

The period from 2013 to 2018 witnessed a notable decline in India-Maldives relations. Factors such as the Maldives' drift toward authoritarian governance, closer ties with China, and disputes over infrastructure projects strained the historically strong bilateral ties.

#### **Political Turmoil and Democratic Backsliding**

One of the key reasons for the deterioration in bilateral relations was the Maldives' political shift toward authoritarianism under President Abdulla Yameen. His administration faced widespread criticism for suppressing opposition parties, restricting media freedom, and undermining democratic institutions. India, a staunch advocate for democratic values in the region, openly expressed concerns about these developments.

In 2015, India condemned the arrest and imprisonment of former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed on charges widely regarded as politically motivated. Diplomatic tensions intensified as India repeatedly called for the restoration of democratic norms and the protection of human rights in the Maldives.

#### **Strengthening Ties with China**



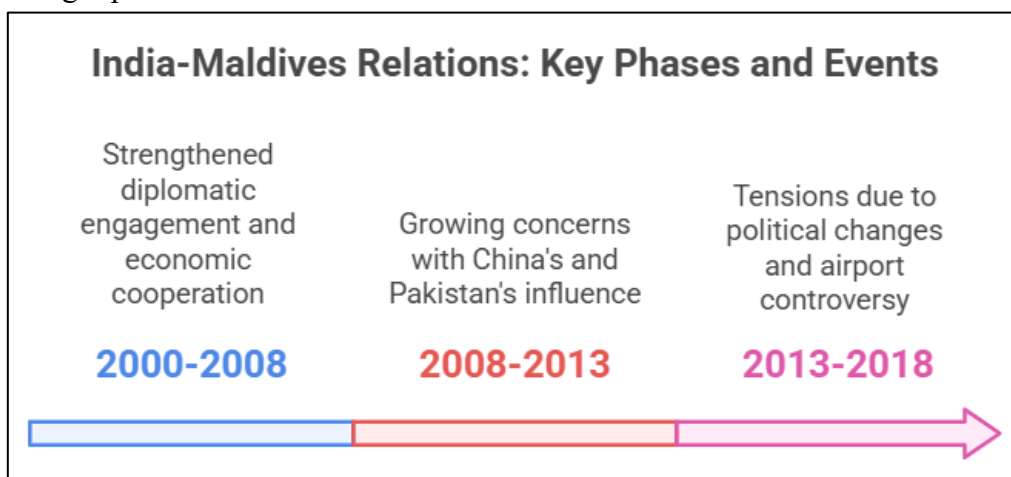
Another major point of contention was the Maldives' growing economic and strategic alignment with China. The Yameen administration actively pursued Chinese investments, including agreements under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Large-scale infrastructure projects funded by China, such as the Sinamalé Bridge and housing developments, significantly increased China's influence in the Maldives.

India viewed these developments with concern, as they posed a strategic challenge to its traditional influence in the Indian Ocean region. The Maldives' alignment with China was perceived as undermining India's security and strategic interests.

### Malé Airport Controversy

A significant flashpoint during this period was the cancellation of an agreement with an Indian infrastructure company, GMR Group, to develop and manage the Malé International Airport. The contract, initially awarded in 2010, was abruptly terminated by the Maldivian government in 2012 and subsequently handed over to a Chinese firm.

This move not only led to legal disputes and financial losses for the Indian company but also symbolized the Maldives' shift toward favoring China over India in key economic partnerships. The airport controversy became a sore point in India-Maldives relations, further exacerbating diplomatic tensions.



### India's Response and Diplomatic Efforts

In response to these challenges, India adopted a cautious yet firm approach. It continued to engage diplomatically with the Maldives while emphasizing the need for democratic reforms and respect for human rights. India also provided economic assistance and maintained people-to-people ties to ensure the preservation of bilateral goodwill.

Despite the strained relations, India refrained from taking aggressive measures, focusing instead on diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation. India's efforts aimed at rebalancing the relationship underscored its commitment to fostering regional stability and maintaining strategic influence in the Maldives.

The phase from 2013 to 2018 was marked by tensions and rebalancing in India-Maldives relations. Political authoritarianism, the Maldives' pro-China stance, and economic disputes strained bilateral ties. However, India's measured approach highlighted its long-term

commitment to reestablishing strong relations and ensuring peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region.

#### **Phase 4: Reset and Revival (2018-present)**

The period from 2018 onward marked a significant revival in India-Maldives relations following the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. His administration's efforts to restore democratic governance and prioritize relations with India ushered in a new era of cooperation and partnership.

#### **Rebalancing Bilateral Relations**

Upon assuming office in 2018, President Solih emphasized the "India-First" policy, reaffirming the Maldives' commitment to maintaining close ties with India. This marked a departure from the previous administration's pro-China stance and was well-received by Indian policymakers.

High-level diplomatic exchanges resumed, and both nations engaged in comprehensive dialogues to strengthen cooperation in various areas. India welcomed these developments and extended strong support to the Maldives' democratic reforms and development agenda.

#### **Strengthening Cooperation in Key Sectors**

India and the Maldives enhanced cooperation in critical sectors, including defense, trade, and infrastructure development. Defense collaboration included joint military exercises, training programs, and maritime security initiatives to safeguard the Indian Ocean region.

Economic and trade ties flourished as India emerged as a key partner in Maldives' development. Infrastructure projects such as the construction of ports, roads, and housing units were supported by Indian investments and technical expertise. Additionally, India facilitated people-to-people exchanges through improved visa policies and educational opportunities.

#### **Financial Assistance and Debt Management**

Recognizing the Maldives' economic challenges, including a mounting debt crisis, India provided substantial financial assistance to stabilize its economy. This included grants, concessional loans, and budgetary support aimed at strengthening the Maldives' fiscal resilience.

India's financial aid played a pivotal role in helping the Maldives manage its debt obligations and reduce its dependence on external actors. These efforts underscored India's commitment to supporting the Maldives as a reliable and trusted partner.

#### **Reaffirmation of the "India-First" Policy**

The Maldives' reaffirmation of the "India-First" policy was a significant diplomatic signal that underscored its prioritization of relations with India. This policy highlighted the strategic importance of India as a key ally and development partner.

President Solih's administration consistently emphasized the importance of India's role in maintaining regional peace and stability. The Maldives also aligned its foreign policy

with India on various international and regional issues, further strengthening their partnership.

The reset and revival phase from 2018 onward marked a positive shift in India-Maldives relations. The Maldives' commitment to democratic governance, strengthened bilateral cooperation, and reaffirmation of the "India-First" policy reinvigorated ties between the two nations. India's support in defense, trade, infrastructure, and financial assistance reinforced its position as a reliable and strategic partner.

## **Challenges and Issues**

### **Political Dynamics**

The political landscape of the Maldives has undergone significant transformation over the last two decades, transitioning from an autocratic regime to a fledgling democracy since 2008. However, this shift has been accompanied by numerous challenges, including political polarization and corruption within the major political parties, such as the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). The recent elections and the involvement of former President Abdulla Yameen, who advocates for an "India-out" campaign while strengthening ties with China, add complexity to the current political climate and raise questions about the future of India-Maldives relations.

### **Geopolitical Tensions**

The Maldives is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean, making it a focal point for geopolitical interests, particularly between India and China. Both nations seek to enhance their influence in the region, leading to a perceived tug-of-war for Maldives' allegiances. The shift in foreign policy, as evidenced by the transition from President Ibrahim Mohammed Solih's "India First" approach to President Mohamed Muizzu's "India Out" stance, illustrates the volatile nature of Maldives' external relations and the potential repercussions for India-Maldives ties.

### **Economic Dependencies**

The Maldives' heavy reliance on foreign aid and investment, particularly from China, poses significant risks to its economic stability. As of mid-2023, the country's foreign debt surpassed \$4 billion, which is approximately 118% of its GDP. This economic distress raises concerns about the long-term implications of such dependencies, especially as the Maldives navigates its relationships with both India and China amidst shifting political tides.

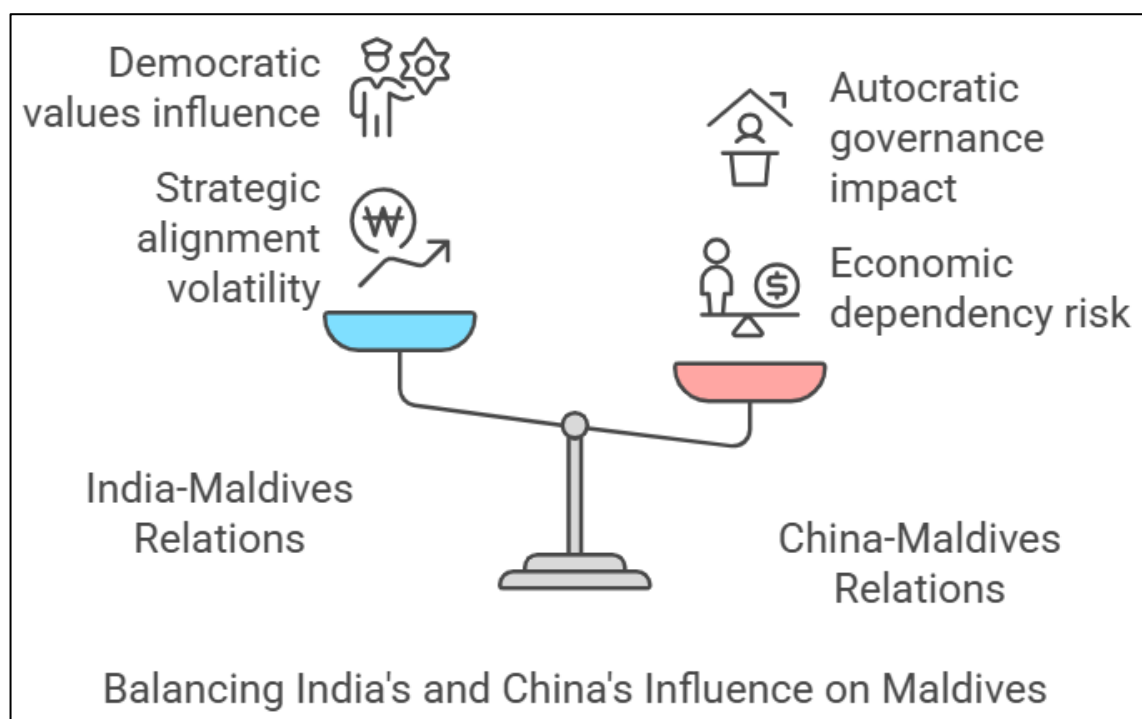
### **Human Rights and Governance**

Despite progress in some areas, challenges remain regarding human rights and governance in the Maldives. The legacy of former President Yameen's administration continues to impact the country's political dynamics, as the new government faces the task of reforming the criminal justice system and addressing human rights violations. Additionally, rising religious fundamentalism and issues related to gender equality, including the passage of laws criminalizing marital rape, reflect ongoing societal challenges that the government must address.

### **International Influence**



The involvement of external actors in Maldives' politics complicates the landscape further. Nations not aligned with democratic values, such as China, have capitalized on the Maldives' political instability to strengthen their foothold in the region. The autocratic leanings of the Yameen regime facilitated China's investments without significant scrutiny regarding governance or human rights, raising concerns about the impact of such relations on the future of democracy in the Maldives. The approach of the international community towards the Maldives, particularly in supporting democratic institutions and practices, will be crucial in shaping the country's political future and its relations with India.



### Conclusion:

Over the past 25 years, India-Maldives relations have been significantly influenced by geographic proximity, shared strategic interests, and changing political dynamics. The bilateral relationship has evolved in the context of regional security concerns, economic collaborations, and various diplomatic engagements.

India has played a crucial role in the Maldives' development, providing assistance across multiple sectors such as infrastructure, defense, and humanitarian aid. This support underscores India's commitment to fostering stability and growth in the Maldives. However, the relationship has faced challenges, particularly due to the Maldives' shifting foreign policy and the increasing influence of external actors like China.

The Maldives' geostrategic importance has intensified, prompting both nations to recognize the need for stability in the Indian Ocean region. India's status as a regional power has shaped its diplomatic strategies toward the Maldives, balancing cooperation with careful intervention when necessary. Meanwhile, the Maldives has aimed to navigate its foreign relations to enhance its sovereignty while benefiting from the support of larger powers.

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